The first CAMP CRYSTAL LAKE novel

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Prologue

The Grave

All alone in the woods, a large doe stood nibbling at a row of leafy green plants. Suddenly, the animal raise her velvety head and listened, as if to some far-off sound. The deer's soft brown eyes stared off into the trees.

Then, after a moment, the graceful animal lowered her head and continued chewing.

In the distance a twig snapped.

The deer's legs tensed. Her head jerked toward the sound. She wrinkled her wet, dark nose as she tried to sniff out the danger. But apparently the deer didn't hear another noise or smell an intruder, because she relaxed again.

Which was a shame.

Because the deer was right the first time.

About a hundred yards away, the hunter was moving slowly forward. He lowered his heavy black boots carefully—heel to toe, heel to toe—trying to keep noise to a minimum.

The hunter was a tall, sinewy man with a black beard that covered most of his greasy face. His dark, unfeeling eyes were locked on the deer. The four fingers on his right hand were wrapped tightly around the wooden handle of his double-barreled twenty-gauge shotgun. The hammer was already cocked. He kept moving forward.

Stalking was hard work. Though it was only the beginning of May, the day was hot and humid, even in the shade of the woods. The hunter was making tiny wheezing sounds as he breathed in and out through his mouth.

To keep the smell of his body from alerting his prey, he was walking straight into the wind. And, with his camouflage clothes and cap, he blended in well. He could see the doe clearly now. It was standing in a tiny clearing in the woods, a perfect target. Soon he'd be close enough to blow its head off.

It was illegal to kill a doe, he knew. But hey, it wasn't even hunting season. So what difference did it make what he killed?

He could hear the deer eating now, hear it crunching on bushes and twigs. Just a few more steps, and—

The hunter's black boots struck something hard. Grunting, he sprawled forward, his shotgun flying out of his hand.

He ended up face down in the dirt. He lifted his head just in time to see the white behind of the doe bobbing up and down as it bounded away deep into the woods.

Furious, the hunter slammed a hand down against the bed of leaves and brown pine needles covering the forest floor. Then he got to his feet and turned around to see what the devil had tripped him.

He stared down in amazement.

Sticking straight up out of the ground, right out of the middle of nowhere, was a white stone, about seven inches high. Why it was as if the stone's only goal in life were to trip him and save that lousy deer. The hunter kicked the stone with all his might.

Thanks to his heavy black boots, he didn't hurt his toes. But the stone didn't budge, either. And that just made him madder.

It took six more hard kicks before the hunter's anger began to cool; then his curiosity took over. Just what was this stone doing here anyway?, he now realized.

Abruptly, the hunter smiled, revealing a row of crooked teeth. This stone had been planted here by someone. And that meant he was looking at—

A crude grave marker.

And the moment he thought that, an image appeared in his mind.

A teenaged boy, a bloody knife in his hand, his rotted face hidden behind a white mask.

Sure, he'd heard all the legends about Jason Voorhees and the gruesome murders the boy had committed in these parts. But until now he'd dismissed them all as bunk. In fact, he'd helped to spread the rumors himself. If folks believed there was a death curse on Crystal Lake, it only made the hunter's job easier. It meant the woods would be deserted, and he would be free to do his poaching.

But now that he had found this grave, the hunter suddenly felt very excited. Just think maybe he'd stumbled on a souvenir of Jason's old murders. He knew how much that would be worth!

The tall man dropped to his knees. He drew his long hunting knife out of its sheath and slammed the silver blade into the soft earth. He began to dig.

After a few minutes, he tossed the knife aside and started scrambling in the dirt with his bare hands. Soon his fingers touched something—something smooth and wet and gray.

When he cleared more dirt aside, he realized what he had found. It was an old cardboard box, about twelve by twelve inches from the looks of it. He dug down deeper until he was able to lift the entire box from the ground. It was surprisingly heavy. Gently, the hunter lifted the box's soggy cardboard lid. And then he looked inside.

His heart seemed to stop.

His jaw dropped and his eyes bulged.

He looked inside the box for only a second. Then his legs started moving as if by themselves, carrying him backward so fast that he fell, landing hard on his back.

It was almost a minute before he was able to stop screaming.

1

Carly

The pink princess phone rang so hard it shook the nightstand. Carly answered on the second ring.

"H-hello?"

"Hey, Carly." A sexy, guy's voice.

"Boone?"

"Don't tell me I woke you up. It's five o'clock in the afternoon, for Chrissake. I mean your mother doesn't make you go to bed this early, does she?"

Carly laughed, arched her back, and stretched. "You didn't wake me up, I was just—" She couldn't think of a good excuse. "I was just sleeping." she admitted.

She sat up, rubbing sleep from her green almond shaped eyes. Thick beams of sunlight slanted through the lace curtains on her windows. It was Thursday, Thursday afternoon. Saying these words to herself helped her clear her head. She always got disoriented when she fell asleep during the day. When the phone rang, he first thought had been that someone was screaming.

She looked down. Next to her on the bed was a large blue book, the size of a phone book. She stared a the book for a long moment before she remembered what it was.

"You know, Boone," she said, "the stupid thing is, I'm not even tired. But this American history stuff I'm reading is so boring that"—she yawned—"excuse me."

Boone chuckled. "Carly, you're a real party girl, you know that?"

She laughed again, but this time she felt a little stung. She knew her reputation. Little miss goody-goody.

A worried woman's voice cut in on the line. "Hello? Whose calling please?"

"I've got it, Mom." Carly said. Frowning she waited for the click as her mother hung up the downstairs extension. Why did her mother act like every phone call was going to bring bad news? If Carly was out somewhere at night and called in (which her mother always

made her do), Mrs. McDonnell would usually answer the phone by asking nervously, "What is it Carly? What's wrong?"

"So, Boone," Carly said when she was sure the line was clear, "how are you?"

Carly's mother had not been pleased—to say the least—when Carly started hanging with Boone. She couldn't really blame her. Billy Boone was twenty, a high school drop-out who wore his long brown hair in a pony tail and roared around town on a motorcycle. He worked—when he worked at all—at his father's hardware store. He lived over his parents garage. Boone's only ambition in life seemed to be to have a good time. Which for Boone meant throwing wild parties and getting drunk.

Of course, the things that Carly's mom hated about Boone were all the same things that made him so popular among the kids in town. Boone pretty much defined cool. Stories about Boone were legendary at Parker Memorial High.

Though he was never caught, Boone was the one who "borrowed" the school's Big Bear mascot uniform and mooned the entire stadium during the homecoming football game. Boone was the one who had gotten duplicate keys to the school gym and had staged what he called "The Real Prom."

It took place hours after the senior prom. Carly had only been a sophomore back then, with braces; she hadn't even known about the secret party. But rumor had it that Boone had wheeled in several kegs of beer and had presided over the festivities dressed as the school principal, Miss Merriam.

When everyone showed up at school Monday morning, they found the gym totally trashed. The faculty knew Boone was responsible. But Boone had already dropped out of school, and they didn't have any real proof; there wasn't much the school could do to him.

"Guess what you're doing this weekend?" Boone now asked her.

Carly's old gray cat, Theo, jumped up onto the bed and gave her a grumpy yellow-eyed stare. She scratched under his chin. "I give up. What?"

"You're going camping."

"Camping? You mean, like overnight?" Carly's first thought was of her mother's reaction. Mrs. McDonnell didn't even like her to stay out late.

"That's right, Carly. Overnight." There was sadistic edge to his voice, as if he were talking to a child. She made a gargoyle face at herself in her closet mirror. What was the matter with her anyway?

"Sounds great!" she said. Terrific. Now she sounded like a chipper little Girl Scout.

"Far out," drawled Boone. "We leave tomorrow at nine sharp and —"

"Boone."

"What?"

"Tomorrow's a school day."

"So?"

"So, I have to go to school."

There was a puzzled silence. "Why?" he asked finally. Then he cackled. "All right, so we'll leave at four o'clock, as soon as you get out of school." The way he said it, he made it sound like something only two-year-olds would bother with. "It's only a two-and-a-half hour drive, so we'll—"

"Two-and-a-half hours?"

"Carly, Carly, Carly." Boone said. He added a mocking sigh. "Look out your window. Do you see campgrounds? Do you see a huge beautiful lake? Do you see thick, green woods? In other words, do you see a spot where we can do whatever we want without anyone around to bother us? No you don't. You see boring Newkirk, Massachusetts. That's why we have to drive north a bit. It's this amazing campground. Crystal Lake

Carly was already sure she wanted to go. But how would she get permission, that was the thing. Her mother..

"What are you going to do around here, anyway?" he pressed. He answered his own question. "You're going to do nothing, that's what. I mean, what is there to do in Newkirk? This town is dead, Carly. Dead."

It was true. Newkirk was a small but well-off town about forty minutes outside Boston. It was a commuter town. Basically, that

seemed to mean it was a place for grown-ups to sleep when they got home from work. As a result, on weekends in Newkirk there never seemed to be anything for anyone to do. Kids all went to the movies, hung out at the mall, got drunk, did drugs if they could get them, and generally got into trouble. Every Monday at school there were guys bragging about how they had puked their guts out over the weekend; every month or so some kid cracked up his car. Dumb. Boring.

"Who else is going?" she asked.

Boone didn't answer right away. Whoops, thought Carly. Maybe—could it be?—that Boone was suggesting a trip just for the two of them?

The thought thrilled her, though she knew the chances of mother agreeing to that was less than zero. She picked up her pink phone and started pacing around the room.

It was amazing how fast life could change. Up until about four months ago, Boone had never even looked at Carly. She didn't think he even knew she existed. Then she made the girl's varsity basketball team at school. The team's captain was Kelly Boone, this really great tomboy of a girl—who also happened to be Boone's younger sister.

Carly started spending time at Kelly's house, tutoring her in calculus. For free, just for a favor. Then one night they were in the kitchen when Boone walked in from the garage wearing only a pair of Jockey shorts. He didn't seem to care if they saw him. He just stood there half naked , eating a slice of pizza, guzzling soda from the bottle, and joking with Kelly.

After mumbling a hello when Kelly introduced him, he didn't talk to Carly much. But two days later, he called Carly and invited her to come over, hang out, and listen to his rock band, The Rotting Corpses, while they practiced.

Since then he'd called her pretty regularly, taken her for a ride on his motorcycle (she hadn't told her mother about that), and invited her to several of his famous parties.

She had had to assure her mother more than once that she was not dating Boone. Unfortunately, this was the truth. As much time as they'd spent together, Carly always got the distinct feeling that he mother had nothing to worry about between her and Boone. Yes,

they had long talks sometimes. But Boone never made a pass. At his parties, he always seemed to have some bimbo around for that purpose.

According to Carly's friend Suzanne, Boone didn't try anything because Carly gave off these straight-A always-do-the-right-thing vibes, and that that was a turnoff for guys. She had wanted to brain Suzanne for saying it, but she suspected she was right.

"Who else is going?" Boone repeated. "Well let's see. A whole bunch of cool people. I'm telling you, Carly, this is going to be the ultimate bash of the century. All thanks to the genius of your very own party guru, Billy Boone."

"Will I know anyone else?" Carly was speaking from experience. She had learned that when Boone went off somewhere with one of his babes, his parties could be pretty lonely for her.

"You'll know me." he said.

"Besides you."

"Well, major bummer is that Kelly's got this wicked sore throat, so she's out. But who else..." He made his voice casual. "Um, Monique."

Carly's heart sank like a big rock in a deep lake. Monique was a transfer student from Paris. With her long strawberry-blond hair, she had all the guys drooling. She definitely sent off the other kind of vibes, the I'll-do-something-really-bad-all-you have-to-do-is-ask-me vibes.

"Monique Dufy?" asked Carly.

"Dufy," Boone said. "Yeah, that's the one."

Carly felt her face flush red and warm. Lucky thing this wasn't a video phone! And here she'd been thinking..."Boone," she said, careful to keep the disappointment out of her voice, "you really are amazing, you know that? How did you pick up Monique already? She's only been here one semester."

"Who said I picked her up? She's just going camping with us."

"But I didn't even know you knew her. How did you meet her?"

"Vell," Boone said, "az you know"—he slipped into a heavy and very bad French accent—"I vaz always ze star French student. So ze teachers, zey ask me to tutor zis Monique in her English."

"Right." Boone had been kicked out of French class almost every other day.

"I met her at the pizza shop," Boone said, dropping the accent. "Hey," he added suddenly, "guess who else is coming?"

"Who?"

Boone didn't answer. She could almost see him grinning as he teased her. Then she heard him chuckle. "Who?" she repeated, her curiosity piqued.

"Paul Sexton."

Carly stopped pacing abruptly. "Cmon, Boone. Seriously."

Boone laughed harder. "I knew that would hook you."

It sure did. Paul Sexton! Paul, who had graduated last year, was only one of the hunkiest guys in town. He had silky blond hair (so silky you wanted to pet it), a powerful jaw, a broad back, and rippling muscles. He was captain of just about everything. And his parents were rich. Girls all giggled about Paul's last name, but only because they thought it was so appropriate. And every girl at Parker was dying to find out firsthand just how appropriate that last name was.

"Boone," Carly said, "Paul Sexton is at Brown. That's in Rhode Island, you know."

"Thanks for the information. It just so happens, Paul and his freshman roommate are coming to this party. They're driving here tomorrow morning and then we're all going up together."

Carly couldn't help it. The thought of going camping in the woods with Paul Sexton made her feel a little faint. It made up for Boone's bringing along Monique—in a big way!

Carly studied herself in the mirror. Her awkward phase had certainly passed. She was wearing baggy shirts and an old maroon Harvard T-shirt that she and Suzanne had picked up once on a day trip to Cambridge. Not flattering clothes, but still her lanky and angular body showed through—and looked good. With her short dark hair and her long thin neck, Carly had been getting plenty of stares lately. But Paul Sexton? Could she interest Paul Sexton?

She tried to keep her voice sounding calm as she asked, "And who else is going?"

"Oh right, like you care."

" I care. If I'm going to get permission from my mom, which I doubt I can do anyway, I'll have to tell her everyone that's—"

"Kyleandsuzanne."

Carly grinned. Kyle and Suzanne spent so much time together, you never heard people say just one of their names.

It was always Kyleandsuzanne, like it was one word or something. She sort of hated Suzanne lately, for spending so much time with Kyle that she never saw her and for spacing out and forgetting whenever they made plans to get together. Still she was glad Suzanne would be coming along.

"So what do you say?" Boone asked.

The truth was Carly was already set on going. But she didn't feel like admitting it just yet. "I don't even know how to swim." she said.

"I'll teach you."

"Oh right."

"I will. Easy. I have this special instruction system that gets incredibly fast results. I throw you in the lake, you either learn to swim or you drown."

"Oh very funny." Carly twirled the long pink phone cord. There was a thump as Theo jumped down onto the fluffy white shag carpet and started lunging after the moving cord like a tiger.

"Listen, Carly, can I say something? You don't swim, you don't drive... if your mother had her way, you'd never go out of the house. That's another reason you've got to come on this trip. You've got to learn to live a little."

Carly blushed. Boone was right. She glanced around her room, reddened even more as she saw the room through Boone's eyes. It looked like the room of a five year old, not a teenager. Everything was white or pink, and almost everything had a lace trim—the dust ruffle on her bed, the canopy above the four poster, the window curtains, even her dictionary stand. Her mother had sewn it all.

Well, thought Carly, she shouldn't hold it against her mom that she doted on her. A lot of Carly's friend wished their mothers would pay them some attention. Besides, Carly was an only child. Her father had died in a car accident when Carly was just two. Her mother had

been alone ever since. She had a right to be nervous about Carly's health and well-being.

"Carly you gotta come." Boone said. "I promised Paul you'd be there. That's like the only reason he's going."

"Billy Boone you are such a liar."

"I'm not."

Her heart started pounding. Look at me. she thought. A minute ago, she couldn't keep her eyes open. Now she was getting so excited about this trip, she wondered if she'd be able to sleep tonight.

"So?" Boone asked. "I'm tired of trying to convince you. What about it? Are you in or are you out?"

"I don't know." Carly said. "Sunday is Mother's Day. My mom and I usually do something special together."

"Oh geez." Boone sounded truly disgusted. "Look, I promise we'll be back Sunday night, okay? You can be with her then."

Carly felt her heart flutter. She had no excuses left. And that meant... she was a goner. "Okay," she said grinning. "I guess I'm in."

Boone whooped.

"But," Carly added quickly, " I don't know how I'm going to get permission, I really don't."

"I'll take care of it."

"How?"

"I'll give your mom a call."

"Oh, that'll really help." said Carly, rolling her eyes.

"Trust me." Boone said.

Carly sighed. The fact was, she did trust him. Anyway, there was no turning back now. Boone must have sensed her mood, because he said, "Carly you won't regret this. I promise you right now. You're going to have the time of your life."

2

Buried Treasure

The voice. The voice told him what to do. There was nothing he could do about it. He had to obey.

First, he took the cardboard box back to his cabin. He set the box on his little white Formica table. Then he sat stiffly in his one rickety wooden chair, waiting for darkness.

That night the sky turned cloudy—no stars, no moon. By eight, the woods were pitch dark. There would be rain tonight, the hunter could feel it.

It was time to follow his first set of instructions. Putting on a pair of yellow work gloves, he hoisted a shovel over his shoulder, put the cardboard box under his arm, and set off into the darkness.

Rick Perkins was having some construction work done a few miles down the road. He was digging a foundation so he could build himself a larger house, the greedy geezer. The hunter knew he could find what he needed there.

He went on foot, staying by the side of the road the whole way, ready to move into the woods at the sound of any approaching car.

As it turned out, this was an unnecessary precaution. He saw and heard no one. Except the animals, that is. Amazing how noisy the woods were at night. Crickets chirping, frogs making that rivet-rivet sound, owls hooting. And his own black boots, trampling along the hard-packed dirt.

It took about an hour to reach the construction site. There stood the huge yellow backhoe, it's dirty metal shovel hanging down like a giant arm.

The supervisor's shed was padlocked. But the hunter was prepared for this little problem. He'd brought along a screwdriver and a flashlight. With these tools it was easy enough to unscrew the rusty metal hasp and remove the padlock from the door.

Inside the shed, he found the key for the backhoe hanging on a pegboard, it's little whit tag neatly marked, as if for the hunter's convenience. When he turned the key in the backhoe's ignition, the

powerful diesel engine roared and rumbled like an airplane. The hunter didn't care. The walk here had convinced him that there was no one around for miles. No one to see, no one to hear. He was able to drive all the way to the site on back-country roads. The cardboard box sat on the seat beside him, jouncing up and down on the black leather seat. The hunter felt powerful sitting behind the wheel of the huge machine. The engine throbbed. The heat baked his legs. The metal flap on the exhaust pipe flipped up and down as the smoke poured out. All the while, the voice guided him, telling him which way to turn.

He drove until he came to an old abandoned house not far from Crystal Lake. It was a gray two-story building set way back from the road across a large field. The hunter guided the giant yellow machine across the lawn. The backhoe's wide wheels made deep tracks in the overgrown grass. About a hundred yards from the house, several small headstones jutted up from the grass in what seemed to be a small family cemetery. Just beyond the small cemetery the voice told him—ordered him—to stop. He braked at once.

Then the voice told him to dig.

It took him a few minutes to master the levers—four large ones and three small ones—that controlled the machine's hydraulic arm. Finally he got the hang of it and lowered the metal arm until the shovel's four metal teeth raked hard into the ground.

It was a mild night, but digging was hard work—even with the help of a machine. The hunter was soon bathed in sweat. The mound of black dirt dug out by the backhoe kept growing, growing.

The voice gave him no relief. There was no stopping, no pausing to rest. He had to dig deeper and deeper.

Around midnight, the threatening skies finally broke. Streaks of lightening briefly lit up the lawn, revealing the eerie scene. The hunter and his machine digging, digging.

The came the rain, sheets of it, screaming down.

The voice issued a new order. The hunter parked the backhoe by the edge of what was now a very deep hole. He retrieved his shovel from the cab floor, and in the frenzy of the rainstorm, started

climbing down into the pit. The rain was rapidly turning his hole into a muddy gorge. He slipped and slid most of his way down.

When he reached the bottom of the pit, he began to dig hard. Though he was tired, he kept up a steady rhythm, the black smelly dirt flying over his shoulder again and again. The rain made each shovel-load twice as heavy, but he didn't show down. He didn't stop.

His clothes were soon drenched, his camouflage shirt was plastered to his skin. Rain drummed on the cardboard visor of his cap. He had no idea how deep he had dug. The night was so dark that when he looked up into the rainstorm he couldn't tell where the hole ended and the sky began. Maybe he was burying himself alive. Maybe he would drown.

It didn't matter. He had no choice. He had to follow orders. As he dug down even deeper, he began to hear the strangest sounds.

At first, the sounds were faint. But they soon grew louder. He couldn't quite make them out. They sounded like distant screams.

Then the air turned foul. It smelled like rotten eggs, except with a sting to it that burned the cartilage of his nose—and beyond. There seemed to be a vapor rising up around his heavy black boots, a thick yellowish mist that wound itself around his legs like a living thing.

And then there was the snake. It oozed through the muddy water around his feet. He felt it sliding up his pant leg, felt its leathery skin rubbing against his own. He must be seeing things, he told himself. He kept digging.

The shovel slipped out of his grasp. And when he bent to pick it up, he saw that the wet ground was moving. He looked closer. There were worms in the hole. Thousands of them, worms so white they must never have seen the sun, worms with thick, bulging bellies.

He shouted in disgust and fear. But only for a moment. The terror passed, and he forced himself to pickup his shovel and keep digging.

Almost immediately, the shovel struck something hard. He lifted the blade of the shovel so that the driving rain could wash off the mud and he could see what he had found.

It was thin and white and pitted with tiny black holes. On his own, in the darkness the hunter would never have known what it was or

what to do with it. But the voice had told him he would find this object here.

It was the mask. The hockey mask Jason Voorhees had worn to hide his rotted face.

Several thick white worms were sliding out of the mask's eyeholes. The hunter banged the mask against his leg to knock off the worms. Then he tossed off his camouflage cap. With two yellow-gloved hands, the hunter carefully placed the wet mask over his face.

As he did so, he felt a strange power surge through his body, making him shake and quiver both with pleasure and pain. It was as if he had been given a whole new supply of blood, stronger and more potent, but blood with bits of glass in it. His mouth twisted in a silent scream.

Just then, another bolt of lightening streak down through the sky. If there had been anyone around to see (which there wasn't), the flash of lightening would have provided just enough light to glimpse the hunter deep in the pit. His arms were lifted toward the sky. His masked face was tilted up into the driving rain. Behind the mask's small round eyeholes, the hunter's dark eyes gleamed hatefully.

The fun was about to begin.

3

Setting Out

"A poncho?" Carly exclaimed. "Mom, I'm not going to summer camp."

Mrs. McDonnell stood at the base of the stairs, her arms loaded with stuff she had just brought down from the attic.

"Well I wish you were going to camp." She said grimly. "I'd feet a lot safer about the whole thing." She carried her load of clothes to the foyer, where Carly's suitcase—already stuffed—sat waiting.

"Mom," Carly said, "I'm going away for two nights. That's it. Two nights."

"Well, it's good to be prepared." Mrs. McDonnell grunted as she kneeled down and started stuffing a second canvas carryall. Carly found herself staring at the top of her mother's head. Mrs. McDonnell had dyed blond hair (a recent experiment; she'd been egged on by Carly) and totally gray roots. Carly felt a knife twist of pity. Her mother was getting old.

Carly glanced at her pink and black Swatch watch. Four-thirty. The last word from Boone was that Paul Sexton (Paul Sexton!) and his roommate (Albert something-or-other) were going to pick her up and drive her to Kyle's. They'd all leave from there. How Boone had got permission from her mother, she had no idea. She was afraid to ask, for fear Mrs. McDonnell would change her mind.

"Don't forget—to call when—you get there." Mrs. McDonnell said, struggling with the suitcase zipper.

"Mom," Carly said, "we're going camping. There might not be any phones in the trees."

"Very Funny." Mrs. McDonnell gave her a limp half-smile.

"Mom, I'll be fine."

"I pray that you're right."

Carly sighed.

A car honked. She turned fast. Through the front door's lace curtain she could see a red Porsche convertible idling in front. Her

heart beat increased instantly. "Okay, Mom." she said, trying to cover up how happy she was to be leaving. "I gotta go."

"Let me get you some fruit and I've got egg salad and—"

Carly hugged her mother, partly as a way of cutting her off, and kissed her cheek. Her mother hugged her back, hard. "I've got to go." Carly said gently.

She could've predicted her mother's last words. They were words she used even when Carly went no farther than the movies. "Be careful." Mrs. McDonnell said.

Carly felt like a true dork going down the walk carrying two big bags, like she was going on a month's trip or something. A tall rugged blond guy with soft silky hair jumped out of the driver's side of the car and hurried to take her bags from her.

"Carly, right?"

Tougue-tied, she nodded dumbly. She knew her mother was watching from the window, which made her feel even more embarrassed.

"I'm Paul Sexton." said the incredibly handsome teenager.

As if she didn't know who he was. As if anyone didn't know.

He hefted the bags easily as they walked toward the car. "you like to travel light, huh?" he joked.

For the first time, she noticed the large bespectacled face ogling her from the rear window of the Porche. Her first impression was that Paul had a huge poodle in the backseat.

"Carly." Paul said as they got in. "This is Albert Harris. Albert, Carly. Carly, Albert. Albert, Carly. Carly, Albert.

Carly found herself giggling like this was the world's funniest joke. Albert was a chubby guy—the word "fat" came instantly to mind—with curly black hair and a nervous stare. He stuck his hand between the leather bucket seats. His hand was flabby and clammy.

"Great to meet you." he gushed. He didn't let go of her hand. "Uh, do you like movies? Have you seen 'Jurassic—"

"Albert," Paul said lightly, "we're going to be together the whole weekend. Ease up big fella."

Carly giggled again, only this time she regretted it immediately, because she could see how hurt Albert was.

Then Paul grinned at her and everything went out of her mind. It was a knowing grin, like the two of them shared some big secret. He flicked on the radio and Mariah Carey started belting out a hot love song that pulsed through the small car. Sex is already in the air, thought Carly with a tense thrill. Mariah was just saying it all out loud.

The streets in Newkirk all looked pretty much identical with their big green lawns and large shingle-style houses. But it was the huge trees lining the streets that really made Newkirk so pretty. Most of the streets were named after them—Maple, Elm, Cedar. Kyle lived on Cypress.

When they drove up to his house, Kyle was sitting cross-legged on the front lawn next to his black guitar case and a large aluminum-frame backpack. He was a stocky but good-looking senior with long brown hair, which he combed straight back. His eyes were closed.

"He looks dead. "Albert commented.

"Probably meditating." Carly explained. Kyle had always been kind of a hippie, but since he and Suzanne had started going out they had both gotten into the whole sixties trip in a big way. They had even started an environmental group at school. They even ate crunchy granola.

Paul honked. Kyle just opened his eyes and smiled.

Then the front door of Kyle's house opened and out bounced Suzanne, tall and gangly and waving both arms in greeting. Her red hair looked coppery in the sunshine. She was wearing a purple tie-dyed T-shirt, a necklace of wooden beads, and short-short cutoffs that made her legs look way too long, like a giraffe.

"Did I get the instructions wrong?" muttered Albert in the backseat. "You did say we were going camping, right, Paul? Not going to Woodstock?"

Carly couldn't think of a good comeback, so she just got out of the car. So did Paul. Albert stayed in back.

Suzanne loped over to Carly and gave her a big hug. "Suzanne," Carly said into her shoulder, "I just saw you an hour ago in English class."

"Well, hugs are affirming." Suzanne said.

Suzanne had already been wearing her nose ring for a month now, but Carly still couldn't get used to the sight of metal piecing nostril. She looked away. "Uh, this is Paul Sexton." Carly said, though she knew he needed no introductions.

"Wooo." Suzanne said, gaping openly. Then she covered her mouth, giggling and said, "Whoops." Paul just grinned. Carly glanced down at Kyle, to see if he minded Suzanne's reaction. Apparently not. He had his eyes closed again.

The front door of Kyle's house opened a second time. Out came Monique. She had her hands in the back pockets of her Guess? Jeans, which meant that as she walked she sort of sashayed, and her chest stuck way out. Which it did anyway. She made a grand approach down the pavement, like a model coming down the runway. Carly could feel Paul tense beside her. Definite competition.

"You're not bringing any bags?" Carly asked Monique crossly. The words seemed to slip out. She suddenly felt like Monique's mother or something.

Monique gave Carly an obnoxious smile. "I have plenty of stuff." she explained haughtily in broken English. "Kyle picked me up and load it all in the van."

"I'm Paul." This time, Carly had forgotten to make introductions. Paul hadn't forgotten. He stuck out his hand. Monique shook it, batting her lashes. She had pert little features, including button eyes and dimples. How could Carly hope to measure up to that?

There was an awkward silence. "Well, looks like we're all here." said Suzanne finally.

"Except Boone." Kyle said. He was still sitting on the lawn and his eyes were still closed.

"Oh right." Suzanne said, slapping her forehead. "I forgot Boone." She giggled. "Great going, Suzanne. After all, he only organized the whole thing."

As if on cue, an obnoxious roar broke the silence. All heads turned to see Boone's Kawasaki Ninja thundering down Cypress Lane. Boone rode right up onto Kyle's lawn, then back down into the street, making a tight circle around them. He dismounted like a cowboy getting off a horse after pulling off a prize-winning stunt in a rodeo.

He pulled off his black Lucite helmet and waved it in the air. "Yihaaa!" he shouted. "Letttt's party!"

Normally it made Carly really nervous when the driver of a car looked at her for too long. She was always sure they were going to crash. But when Paul looked at her, she melted. What eyes! They were ice-blue and twinkly, like clear sparkling water.

"How you holding up?" he asked.

"Not too bad." Albert said from the back. He was lying on his back with one chubby arm draped over his sweaty forehead. "You know," he said, "I think I'm not going to be carsick for once."

"I wasn't talking to you, dweeb-head." called Paul. "I was talking to Carly here."

They'd already been on the road almost two hours. They had left Newkirk far behind. Now they were on a narrow two lane black top, Route 107. They sure made a strange caravan, thought Carly. Boone and Monique were leading the way on Boone's huge motorcycle. Paul's sleek red car came second. And in last place was this old beat-up Volkswagen van with psychedelic graffiti spray painted all over it —Kyle and Suzanne.

Paul reached down to change gears. Which meant that in the cramped convertible, he practically put his hand on Carly's bare left knee. "Sorry." he told her, flashing that sexy grin of his.

"No problem." Carly said. The truth was, she wouldn't have minded if he tried to shift her *knee* into gear. She could feel herself making goo-goo eyes at him like a puppy.

Easy, Carly, she warned herself. If she kept going at this rate, by Sunday she'd be lying at his feet.

Paul was driving with the top down. The stiff breeze felt good against Carly's skin, but even with her seatbelt on she felt like she might blow right out of the car.

"Paul?" Albert said loudly, calling over the wind.

"What?"

"Am I going to be able to get to a pay phone on Sunday?"

Paul sighed and turned to Carly. "Albert's worried that he won't be able to call his mom for Mother's Day." he explained. "He's been bugging me about this for two days."

"Aw, that's sweet." Carly called, smiling back at Albert.

Albert grinned briefly, then frowned again. "Just promise me that I'm going to be able to get to a pay phone."

"Yes, Albert." Paul said. "For the millionth time, yes. I mean, where do you think we're going, anyway? The jungle? This is Crystal Lake. That's part of New England. Just like your hometown of Providence."

Albert sat up and looked out the window. "Providence doesn't have woods on either side of the road." he whined. "Providence isn't filled with poison ivy and wild bears."

"Albert is not what you'd call the outdoorsy type." Paul explained to Carly. "He's more of what you'd call a wuss. He doesn't even know how to drive."

Carly smiled at Albert again. "I've got the same problem." she said. "I mean, I got my license and everything. But my mom always got so worried when I went out driving someplace that I just stop driving, and now I'm out of practice and... too scared to try."

Albert stuck out his hand. "Join the club. Cowards Anonymous."

She shook his hand and laughed. Albert was starting to grow on her. His hand was still clammy, though.

"Are you scared of water?" Albert asked.

"What?"

He cupped his hand over his mouth. "Are you scared of water?!"

"Petrified."

"Skin cancer?"

"I have nightmares every night."

"Wow." said Albert. "We're soulmates!"

When Carly turned back in her seat, Paul's handsome rugged features were were tensed up in a frown. Could it that he minded when she talked to Albert? The possibility excited her so much that now her own hands started to get clammy.

Then Albert called weakly, "Paul?"

"*What?*"

"On second thought I think I *am* going to be sick. Next rest stop you see, could we pull over?"

Carly pointed up ahead. "Looks like Boone read your mind, Albert. He's turning in." She stuck her hand through the open roof to signal Kyle and Suzanne. Of course, it would be kind of hard for them to miss that they were turning, since they were the only cars on the road. Then again, those two were so laid back, Carly figured she should send up flares.

Paul slowed down and turned onto a dirt road leading from the highway, and Carly got her first glimpse of the rest stop. Two ancient old pumps, a little gray shack, and a weatherbeaten sign: NED'S GAS.

The place looked totally deserted. But at least there was a pay phone. Carly felt inside her pocket for change. She could call her mom after all.

And then maybe, just maybe, she could convince her mother that there was no need to worry.

4

Worrying

Seven miles from Ned's Gas, outside a small cottage set in the woods....

A woman in a faded red housedress was unpinning a batch of stiff wind-dried clothes from her clothesline. Then she heard a car.

She turned to watch her husband's beat-up blue Land Rover power up the sandy drive. Her husband waved and smiled broadly as he got out. The woman felt her stomach flutter with tension. She knew that smile. It was the smile her husband used when he wanted to put her at her ease, and it only served to worry her more.

"What's wrong?" she asked as the large heavyset man walked toward her.

He kept smiling. "You read me too well, you know that?"

She wasn't delayed by his compliment.

"What is it? What's happened?"

"Oh, it's probably nothing." he said in a way that said it was definitely something. "In fact, I'm sure it's nothing."

The man took off his red and blue New England Patriots cap and scratched his mostly bald head. The woman waited. "It's just... well, I've been trying to reach Joe Travers this past couple of days." He said. "No luck."

"Oh." the woman said, visibly relieved. "Well, you know Joe. He goes off on those jaunts of his poaching up a storm."

Her husband didn't look convinced, but he nodded.

"I mean," she said, "Joe can take care of himself if anyone can. Why the worst thing that ever happened to Joe Travers was losing that finger, and that was in his own trap."

"I know, I know." her husband said. "But there's more. I just went by his cabin. There was a Mother's Day card Joe had made lying on the kitchen table."

"Well what's wrong with that?" asked the woman, smiling in surprise.

Her husband looked back at her blankly "Joe's mother has been dead for five years."

The husband and wife looked at each other for a moment, until the wife shivered and looked away "Well, hey," she said as she busied herself with the laundry, "maybe the card's for me." She winked. "Here help me with this." She handed him one end of a sheet to be folded.

The husband held his end of the sheet, she held her's; as she walked toward him, she said, "Stop worrying. He'll turn up. Besides, that hangdog look of yours is giving me the willies."

"It's just..." He trailed off, apparently at a loss for words.

"It's just what?"

"Well, you know—there's been so much trouble around these parts, I feel like I've developed a sixth sense for it. And—" He smiled nervously, as if aware that what he was about to say was going to sound silly "It's gotten so I feel it, you know. When it's coming. I can feel it in the air."

"That's ridiculous." said the woman. But of course she didn't think it was ridiculous at all. She knew exactly what her husband meant. And she'd been feeling the same way all day. Something was worrying her, had been since she woke up. Something was wrong.

She stacked the neatly folded sheet on top of the rest of her wash in the blue plastic basket. She scooped up the basket, then started for the back door.

"I'm going to call Sheriff Delaney." the man said flatly when her back was turned.

"Suit yourself." The woman called back.

She was almost at the door when her husband said, "Hold it!"

He stepped quickly ahead of her so he could open the cottage himself.

"Well, well," she said, "I guess chivalry isn't dead after all."

Then the husband opened the door and—

The deafening blast of the hunter's shotgun caught him in the face.

You might say it was the husband's final act of chivalry.

He died an instant before his wife.

5

Ned's Gas

Monique was kicking the dusty ground in disgust as Carly got out of the car. "Boone, you call this a gas station?" she complained loudly.

Boone was rapping on the shack door. "What you doing?" Monique demanded. "There is no one there, I telling you. This whole place is desert."

"Deserted." Boone corrected her with an easy grin. "Hey." he waved at Carly and Paul.

Carly waved back. Then she dropped her head back and took a deep breath. It was amazing. The air smelled so clean and fresh it almost stung her lungs.

Slowly and with difficulty, Albert was squeezing his large body out of the small car. He was clutching his big stomach with one hand. He had loosened his belt. "Wow," he said, "I think we just did some time travel. Look at this place. We're back in the 1930s. It's the Great Depression!"

"Hey!" Boone suddenly yelled. He started running toward the road and waving his arms. "Hey! Kyle!"

He was too late. The psychedelic VW had driven right by the gas station.

"Unbelievable." Albert said, laughing and shaking his head. "They missed it!"

A moment later, the old van came into view again, backing up. The VW's doors opened, letting out a blast of Jimi Hendrix on Kyle's tape deck.

"We were listening to some really heavy tunes." Kyle explained, sheepishly as he and Suzanne joined the rest of the group.

"We totally spaced out." Suzanne added.

"Gee," Boone said, "what a shocker."

Paul asked, "So what's the story? Are we lost?"

"We're fine." Boone said. "In fact, we could walk to the campsite from here. Monique just wanted to use the john."

"Except there is none." Monique said, pouting and showing off her full red lips.

"Are you kidding?" Boone spun around, gesturing with his long arms. "Monique look around you. Nothing but woods. Nothing for miles."

Carly smiled. She had never seen Boone look so happy. In Newkirk, he always looked like he was brooding about something, even when he was partying. Out here he seemed totally free.

"I'm serious," he went on, "we're in the wilds now. You can go to the bathroom anywhere you like. Go ahead. We won't peek."

"Boone's right." Kyle said thoughtfully. "I mean, after all, what are we, really? We're just part of nature, right? Part of the food chain."

"That's comforting." said Albert.

Monique was jabbing Boone in the ribs. "You are disgusting." she told him.

"Listen." Albert told Boone. "If we're not lost, I think we should hurry up and get to the campgrounds, don't you? I mean, don't we need to set up and everything before it gets really dark?"

Boone draped a long arm around Albert's round shoulders. "Albert," he said in a mock fatherly tone, "let me explain something to you, okay? We're all here to party and chill and have a good time. Do yourself a favor. Don't worry so much."

Everyone started laughing. Carly held back. She didn't want this trip to turn into pick-on-Albert time.

"Guys, I'm telling you I've outdone myself. You won't believe how beautiful these campgrounds are. And get this. The whole campsite is totally one-hundred-percent people-free."

"People-free?" Albert looked worried all over again. "Why? Is there something wrong with the place?"

Boone frowned. "Uh, didn't you tell him, Paul?"

"Aw, gee," Paul said, slapping Albert on the back. "I forgot."

"Forgot what?" Carly found herself asking along with Albert.

"Well, see, it's like this." Boone said. He squinted up at the setting sun, taking his time. "there's a legend about these parts. They say there's this, well, this death curse."

Albert's mouth opened in horror. "Death curse? I'm outa here."

"Oh, puhlease." Carly scoffed. "There is no such thing as a death curse." Still she felt a tingle of fear race down her spine.

"Yes, Albert can't you tell he's teasing?" Monique added. "Don't be such a baby." Monique looked pretty scared herself.

"That's right." Paul said. "There's nothing to be scared of. Unless —" He paused dramatically.

"Unless what?" Suzanne asked, her eyes wide.

"Unless you believe in the undead." Paul finished.

"The undead?" asked Kyle. He whistled. "Cool!"

Monique put her hands over her ears. "This is not funny, I get scared now."

"All right guys." said Carly. "You can stop trying to frighten us." To Monique she added. "Don't pay any attention."

"Of course I won't." Monique sneered, looking superior. "I was just teasing."

Paul and Boone looked at each other. "Well, do you want to tell them or should I?" Paul asked.

"Go ahead." Boone said.

"Well," Paul began. "this camp we're going to, there used to be a real camp here, a long time ago. Camp Crystal Lake. But then this boy—Jason—he drowned, see. While some counselors were, you know, doing it?"

Suzanne giggled nervously.

"So his mother, Mrs. Voorhees, she went berserk and murdered the counselors who were responsible. Except she was never caught."

"Never caught?" Albert repeated stupidly.

Paul ignored him. "But the deaths kind of put a crimp in the camp schedule—ha ha. So they closed the place down."

"But then," Boone, picked up the story smoothly as all heads turned to watch him. "Years later, some guy decided to open the camp back up. And he had all the counselors there for pre-camp. And the boy's mother, this Mrs. Voorhees, she was still crazy and she still wanted revenge. So she killed all the new counselors."

"All?" Monique asked in a hollow voice.

"All but one." Boone said. "This girl survived because she"—he cackled hysterically—"she chopped off the old lady's head!"

"Oh, that's really funny, Boone." Carly said. "Very mature." She was mad for several reasons. For one thing, he was succeeding in scaring her, and she hated that. For another, if he was telling the truth, in any way, then she was mad she hadn't heard all this way before now.

The more she scowled, though, the harder Boone laughed. "Tell what happened next." he told Paul between wheezes and chuckles.

"Next?" Paul looked confused. "Oh, yeah. Then the story gets pretty weird."

"*Then* the story gets weird?" Albert asked in a high voice. "Up till now, it was what? Normal?"

"You see," Paul said solemnly, "legend has it that Mrs. Voorhees head was never found. Just her body." He burst out laughing as well.

"But the best part," Boone said, "the legend about Mrs. Voorhees' son, Jason. The locals think the guy keeps coming back from the dead. They think he's like this monster that haunts the lake."

Carly glanced around the group. Albert, Suzanne, and Monique were all looking terrified. But for Carly, anger was rapidly replacing fear. "Is any of this true?" she demanded, staring straight at Paul.

When he finally stopped laughing, he said, "It's all true, actually." He gave her an apologetic shrug.

For a moment, everyone was silent. Then Carly turned to Boone and said evenly, "Why didn't you tell me this last night?"

"I know. I should have. But then then you wouldn't have come, would you? And the thing is, the place is perfectly safe now. I mean, that's why it's such a great party spot. No one ever comes out here. Ever. They're too spooked.

"And all this happened years ago." Paul added.

So much for trusting Boone, thought Carly. She sighed. Well... there was no going back now. She would have to make the best of it.

And then something happened that took the sting right out of the whole situation. Paul put his arm around her waist. "Don't worry." he said. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't think it was safe. And if anything happens, I'll protect you." The feel of his hand, pressing through her shirt, was electric.

Monique started punching Boone's arm. "I kill you." she said.

Boone held up his hands as if defending himself. "Oh no." he said. "Here we go. It's the death curse!"

Everyone started laughing, which helped release the tension. Then Kyle started howling like a wolf. Which made everyone laugh harder. The groups laughter grew and grew, until—

Paul said, "Hey."

He didn't say it loudly. But the urgency in his voice frightened Carly all over again. She turned fast to look at Paul.

The look on his face made her heart start to pound.

The way Paul was staring, it looked as if he were watching something right behind her.

"Someone's coming." he said.

6

A Warning

"There!" Paul cried.

He was pointing up at the woods behind the tiny station. For the first time, Carly saw that a narrow path led up the hill. At the top of the hill the roof of a cottage peeked out through the thick of the trees. And coming down the path, moving in and out of the leaves and shadows, was a large man in blue overalls.

"You're seeing things." Boone told Paul with a sneer.

"Oh yeah? Well I'm seeing them too!" Albert said. He took a few skittering steps backward, getting ready to make a run for it. Carly felt like doing the same but held her ground.

The stranger emerged from the woods at the base of the path. "Howdy, folks." He was a large chunky man, looking about fifty, with a crewcut and a bland easy smile across his wide face. "Let me guess. You're looking for Jason Voorhees, right?"

At the mention of the name , Carly felt her mouth go dry. Privately she'd been sure Boone and Paul were just teasing. Until now.

"Yup. That's what I says to myself when I sees you pull in." the man explained, his eyes twinkling merrily. "I says, Ned, here's more of them crazy thrill-seekers, want to catch a glimpse of the world's greatest monster. Well, you're too late, my friends. You won't find Jason Voorhees. Not around here anyway. Boy's dead."

"I'm heartbroken." mumbled Albert.

"Yessir." said the man. "Dead and gone. And good riddance to him, I say. Why, do you have any idea what that crazy boy did for business around these parts? Killed it, that's what. Killed it just as sure as he stabbed and killed all those nice young teenagers. Stabbed our business right through the heart."

"Uh, Boone." Albert began. "Maybe we should—"

"I mean," the man interrupted, "who in there right minds would live around here now, did you ever think about that? After all the blood that's been shed in Crystal Lake? No one, that's who. The only people who live around here nowadays are people who've got no

choice. People like me, who don't have the money to move. People like me and my sweet old ma."

The man stepped forward abruptly, and Albert took a corresponding giant step backward. The man laughed. He held out a large meaty hand for anyone to shake. No one did. "Name's Varner. Ned Varner. This here's my gas station."

"It's very lovely." Suzanne said, with a nervous smile.

"Why thanks. Myself, I think it's a run down piece of trash, but I sure do appreciate the compliment. Yup. I live right up there." He pointed up the hill. "With my sweet old ma. But I'm afraid I don't get too much business these days. Why, do you know you're the very first car that's driven by today? Very first car."

He eyed the odd assortment of vehicles. "Want me to check your oil, fellows? I mean—ha, ha—it wouldn't do to have your cars breaking down while you're in *these* parts, now would it?"

"Uh, no," Paul began, "that's okay, we—"

Ned Varner laughed loudly, the laugh turning into a wheeze, then a cough. "I'm only joshing you. Truth is, there's nothing for you—or for anyone—to be scared of anymore. And I'll tell you why."

"Please don't." Albert begged.

But Varner went on. "It'll sound crazy. I mean, I don't rightly believe it myself. But it's what folks say. They say Jason is... in Hell."

Oddly enough, Carly felt a wave of relief. The man was insane, she decided, one of those backwoods crazies you always heard about. She could dismiss anything he said, she was sure of it. The only thing they had to worry about was getting safely away from the man's gas station! She caught Boone's eyes. His face was glowing. Boone was so nutty, he loved this kind of thing.

"That's right," Ned Varner repeated, "Jason Voorhees is in *Hell*. May he rot and burn! You see, that boy had a nasty habit of not staying dead. You can laugh all you like"—no one was laughing —"why, I've done some laughing about it myself. But I've seen too much killing, too much blood. I'm not laughing anymore. That boy kept coming back from the grave, and that's the truth. Coming back and taking his revenge."

Ned looked down at the dusty ground, as if he were trying to see Jason buried down there. "But that's all over now." he said. He took a toothpick from behind his ear—it looked very old—and popped it in his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully for a moment, then said, "The way people tell it, after his last little killing spree, Jason got sucked down right into the ground."

Ned Varner made a large fist with one meaty hand and gestured it, pulling down sharply. "I mean *ripped* down through the rocks and the roots as if the Devil himself had him by the legs and was yanking him home. And the spot where Jason disappeared? They say it's a Hell's gateway, or some such. A kind of doorway down to the worst evils you can imagine, and some things you couldn't even think of if you tried. But here's the good news."

"Ah yes." said Albert. "I was wondering when you'd get to the good news." Albert looked green—more nauseated than he had in the car, even.

"Folks say that that gateway is shut tight now, now that Jason is gone. I believe it, too. 'Cause things been quiet around here lately. Awful quiet. You might say... dead."

"That's very quiet." Suzanne agreed. Her voice had a tremble in it.

"But hey." Ned Varner chuckled again, then coughed. "It's better than the other way, right? I'll give you that. And who knows? Maybe there won't be anymore killings. Maybe old Crystal Lake is in for some peace at last." He paused, twirling his toothpick in his mouth. "Maybe." he added doubtfully.

Carly clenched and unclenched her hands, trying to keep the blood flowing. She had always considered herself a pretty levelheaded person. Right now, though, she felt like telling Boone to turn his bike around and lead them home.

"Course," said Varner, "if you want my opinion, there's evil in the air all round this lake. If you live here too long, it gets in your blood. It gets you thinking bad things." he squinted, tilted his head to one side. "Know what I mean?"

"Oh yeah. Sure thing." Paul said to Ned with a mocking tone. "Tell me something. How many times have you yourself actually seen this Jason?"

"How many times have I seen him?" Ned echoed, still grinning that idiotic grin of his. "I haven't ever seen him. Haven't had the privileged. Course, if I had seen him, I'd probably be dead now, wouldn't I?"

"I'm going home." Albert said.

The man in the overalls threw back his head and laughed. "I don't blame you, son."

"Boone," Suzanne said quickly, "you wanted to get directions to the campsite, right?"

"What?" asked Boone. "Oh yeah. Uh, we're going to do some camping at the Crystal Lake campgrounds."

Ned Varner's eyes narrowed. "You're going out there?"

"Why?" Monique asked. "Is there problem?"

"Well," Ned said, "there's such a thing as pushin of your luck, know what I mean? Here's a little warning. Don't go near the place. Demons, ghost, that kind of thing. You know."

Kyle clapped his hands together. "Far out."

Last year Paul Sexton had been All-American in wrestling. Now he crossed his arms across his broad chest so that the muscles bulged. Under the circumstances, Carly was awfully glad she was standing next to him. He stepped forward, with an air of taking charge.

"Actually, sir," Paul said, giving the man a little smile, "we just need a bathroom and maybe some cold Cokes if you sell them. We don't need you to try to scare us, if it's all the same to you. Okay?"

Ned's smile never wavered. He said, "Son, your absolutely right. My sweet old ma is always telling me the same thing. Says I drive away the little business we still get by by talking about the murders. Here let me open up the store."

As if to wash away all the scary things they had just heard, Paul bought a round of Cokes for the group. They were the old fashioned glass kind that Carly loved. After taking their money and making change, Ned Varner sat inside the shack and didn't bother them anymore. Apparently, Paul had put him in his place. But Carly could see the old man through the shack window. And she didn't like the way he kept grinning.

Turned out there was a bathroom, after all. Monique complained a lot, saying it wasn't clean enough for her, but she went. Paul sat on the small wooden porch of the gas station, drinking his Coke. Carly dared to sit next to him. Was it her imagination, or did he move over slightly so that their bare legs were just touching? She could feel the curly blond hairs on his leg tickling her skin.

Albert spent the whole time on the pay phone.

"I had to lie to my mother." he told the group as he returned. He was frowning and sweating like this was the first time he had lied to his mom his entire life. Carly felt a wave of sympathy for him. She knew how he felt. She still felt guilty that she hadn't told her mother about riding on Boone's motorcycle. But how could she? Mrs. McDonnell was almost as scared of motorcycles as she was of cancer and serial killers.

"What was the lie?" Paul asked.

"I didn't tell her any of that stuff about the death curse." said Albert.

"Smart move." Paul told him. He took an endless swig, draining the last of his soda, and stood up. Everyone stood up as well. Carly sensed that Paul had now become sort of co-leader of their outing, along with Boone. Maybe it was because he told off Ned Varner. Whatever the reason, it only made Carly's crush on him grow even stronger.

Boone was right. The campground turned out to be ten minutes away. They drove on dirt roads now, winding through thick woods; the road got narrower and narrower as they went deeper into no-man's-land.

Then Carly spotted an old wooden sign by the sign of the road, one of those rustic signs with letters carved out of wood: WELCOME TO CAMP CRYSTAL LAKE. From the way the sign was overgrown with plants and bushes and weeds, it didn't look like too many campers had been welcomed here for a long time.

They drove into a clearing of thick over-grown grass. In front of them was a horseshoe of large wooden cabins. The cabins were old, weatherbeaten. It had rained recently. The surrounding woods looked dense and dark and sodden. There was a steady drip, drip,

drip of water from leaves. It scared Carly to think they were standing at the scene of a famous crime. She tried to push the thought from her mind.

"This is fantastic." Kyle gushed as he hopped out of his van.

"We have this whole place to ourselves?" Suzanne asked. "Wow!"

Those two: they had probably already forgotten about the killings, Carly thought.

"You haven't seen half of it." Boone said proudly as they started to unload their backpacks, bags, and supplies from the bike and two cars. "The camp goes on and on. There are all these other cabins farther back in the woods."

"It's nice." Carly said, lying. She smiled at Boone. She couldn't stay mad at him for long.

Boone yodelled, his voice echoed in the woods. "We're going to have a little blast!"

"Could someone remind me what poison ivy looks like?" Albert asked. He was bending over to study the grass.

"It's airborne." Paul said. "If don't want to get it, stop breathing."

"So what we do now?" Monique asked with that little pout of hers.

"Step one," Boone said raising a finger in the air, "we pick cabins. You know, settle in. Step two, I give you a guided tour of Boone's amazing camp and party center. Step three, a campfire and cookout complete with—" he pulled out a red and white cooler he had loaded into Kyle's van—"brewski!"

There were cheers.

"Uh, Paul? Which cabin should *we* take?" It was Albert; he was holding Paul's elbow.

"Listen, Al." Paul said, pulling his arm free. "I kinda want my privacy, you know? Commune with nature? I think I'm going to pick one of the cabins that's off in the woods a little."

Paul caught Carly's eye and winked. Carly's knees went all trembly. Maybe Paul didn't really plan on being alone after all!

"Oh sure, sure whatever." Albert said, looking totally hurt.

Monique was wrestling with her big blue backpack. "Here," Paul said, "let me give you a hand." He reached into the trunk and lifted

out the pack. Even *he* grunted under the load. "Wow." he said. "What do you have in here, bricks?"

"Just a few items." Monique said. She was brushing her strawberry blond hair from her eyes, then let it drop right back again.

Paul fitted the pack onto her back. He gripped her shoulders as if to steady her, but he held onto her shoulder for a while. Carly tried not to stare, but she couldn't help it as Paul gave Monique's shoulders a quick massage. She felt jealous—and confused. What was the deal here? Was she misreading the signals? Or was Paul making a play for both of them?

"You all set?" Paul asked.

"Thank you, yes." the French girl said. Then she tottered off, heading for the nearest cabin.

Paul turned and saw Carly staring at him. He grinned so broadly that Carly felt instantly better.

There was a loud creak as Monique pulled open the cabin's rusty screen door. The sound was loud and ominous.

Carly turned just in time to see Monique disappear inside the dark open doorway.

For a moment, silence.

And then—

There was the most bloodcurdling scream Carly had ever heard in her life.

7

A Suite at the Waldorf

Suzanne was the closest to the cabin. She started running, which wasn't easy with her backpack on. Carly was running too. So was everyone.

And then the screaming stopped.

Suzanne charged through the open doorway. Carly barreled in after her.

It was a dingy cabin filled with cobwebs and the smell of mildewed wood. Three bunk beds—all metal, bare, and prisonlike—glinted silver in the dim darkness. As their eyes adjusted to the gloom, Carly saw Monique huddled in the far corner, one hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with terror.

"What?!" shrieked Suzanne. "What is it?"

Monique didn't answer. Only pointed. In a flash, a few terrifying thoughts rushed through Carly's mind. Monique was pointing to the other side of the cabin, the side Carly hadn't even looked at yet. And that meant that whatever was making Monique scream was now—Right behind her.

She whirled, bumped into Suzanne, whose backpack went crashing into one of the bunks. Suzanne staggered, lost her balance, and then fell over in a heap, her arms and legs all seeming to fly in different directions.

Just as—

Kyle rushed in. "Wha...?" he breathed.

He was followed by Boone, then Paul, the three big guys crowding the doorway. They all stared around the empty cabin, puzzled.

"What are you doing on the ground, Suz?" Kyle asked finally.

Suzanne sat up. "Don't ask."

Carly was beginning to feel very foolish.

"Monique?" Boone asked. "That wasn't you I heard screaming by any chance, now was it?"

Monique took her hand away from her mouth at last. "Look at this cabin." she said. "It is absolutely filth. You expect me to sleep here?"

Paul shook his head in amazement, then whistled. "That's why you screamed?"

Kyle helped Suzanne up off the floor and brushed off her back. "Oh, now," Suzanne said, "don't pick on her, Boone. That's okay, Monique." she told the French girl. "I know just how you feel. I used to be very uptight about the country, too, before Kyle turned me on to outdoor living, you know? Wait, you'll see. By Sunday, you won't want to leave."

"I'm leaving right now." Monique said, heading for the door.

Boone blocked the doorway. "How are you going to get home?" He was smirking.

"You driving me." Monique said to Boone near tears.

Boone shook his head grinning.

"What'd you expect, Monique?" Paul asked, laughing. "A suite at the Waldorf?"

Sure enough, Monique started crying. "There not even... place... to plug in my blow dryer."

"Aw." Boone said. "That *is* a nightmare."

"Stop it! Don't tease her anymore." Carly said. She put a protective arm around Monique. The girl might be totally spoiled, but Carly could never stand to see anyone cry. "Don't worry, Monique." she told her. "If you want to go home, you can go home. Even if I have to drive you myself."

She felt good saying it, but she was also wondering about her true motives. Did she want to get rid of Monique? Or was she trying to chicken out of this situation herself?

"Thank you." Monique sniffed.

Kyle was tugging Suzanne's hand. "C'mon." he said. "Let's go find a cabin."

Carly's head jerked up in surprise. It hadn't occurred to her until that moment that she and Suzanne wouldn't be bunked together. It made sense that they wouldn't—it just hadn't occurred to her. She reddened.

"Wait." Suzanne said. She looked at Carly. "Is that okay with you?"

At least she asked—it made Carly like Suzanne all over again. "Sure." she answered with a grin. To Monique she added, "Well that

leaves us two. How about you and me share this cabin? You watch. We'll clean it up a little, put some of our stuff out, it'll start to look homey."

Monique nodded glumly. Thanks to her tears, her mascara had smeared, making her look like a sad raccoon. But she was so pretty even messed up makeup only made her look even more glamorous.

"Hey, guys?" a high voice called from far outside the cabin. "What's going on in there? Is the coast clear or what?"

Albert. Carly had forgotten all about him.

"We're all dead." Paul called back.

"C'mon, seriously." Albert whined. "Don't tease me. Is—Oh my God!"

Everyone looked at one another, but this time there were smiles.

"What's the matter, Albert?" Boone called. "Can't find a phone?"

Monique put a hand over her mouth as she giggled.

"No. There's this worm, you should see it. Totally white and fat. I've never seen anything like it."

"Sounds like he's looking in the mirror." Boone muttered for the benefit of everyone in the cabin.

"Listen, Monique," said Suzanne, "maybe later tonight I'll teach you some Yoga breathing, it'll really relax you. Then she followed Kyle out the door.

"Kyle," Boone called after them, "I'm going to give a grand tour in a few minutes. Don't go too far."

"Okey-doke."

"And after that, I need a hand gathering some firewood, okay?"

"You got it." Kyle called.

But twenty minutes later, Kyle and Suzanne still had not returned.

8

The Campfire

Over each cabin door hung a carved wooden nameplate. "And this, as you can see"—Boone pointed—"is Cabin Six."

"Beautiful name." joked Albert.

"I don't like this place." Monique complained, as Boone led them down another trail.

"So I gathered, Monique." Boone said. "So I gathered."

"Hey, Carly." said Paul, who was walking behind her.

Carly stopped.

"The woods are so alive, aren't they?" Paul asked. "Just listen."

They both listened.

If she were back in Newkirk right now, she'd be hearing the hum as the streetlights came on. Here, Carly could hear all these rattling sounds and chirpings and cheepings and peepings and buzzings. All around them there were living things. It was a great feeling.

It was also a great feeling to have Paul standing so close to her while the group went ahead. And then—suddenly—she knew he was going to kiss her. It was as if they went into slow motion. Their eyes locked. Sure enough, his head started to move toward hers. She was too shocked to move. Her eyes widened.

"Oh there you are." Albert said. Carly's head jerked toward the sound. So did Paul's. "Please, guys." begged the chubby teenager. "Don't fall behind like that again. It scares me. I thought you disappeared."

If looks could kill, the look Paul was giving Albert just then would have done the trick. But Albert didn't seem to notice. He turned and started back down the trail. They followed.

Carly was in a daze. She never thought she'd want to kiss someone she'd just met. But she did.

Up ahead, Boone was standing by a large brown shack raised up on cinder blocks with a boiler and pipes and things attached to the outside. "And this," Boone said, "is the girl's outhouse."

"I'm not using this." Monique insisted as they filed inside. "I hold it in the whole trip. That's all."

The smell in the bathroom was awful. Not just the usual stale bathroom smells. There was something else in the air in here—something human and rotting. The lights didn't work, of course—there was no electricity in any of the cabins. Then Albert tried one of the spigots. No water, no sound, no nothing.

"Boone," he said, "there's no water."

"Of course there's no water." Boone said.

Albert looked panicked. "Well, what are we going to do for water?"

Boone shrugged and smiled. "Who needs water when we have beer?"

"Boone," Monique said, "I hate you, you know. What made you think this is good place to stay?"

"Boone, I'm afraid I have to agree with her." Paul said.

"I'll second that motion." said Albert.

Boone shook his head slowly. Carly could tell he was really starting to get mad. "What's the matter with you guys?" he said, his eyes flashing. "I mean, what kind of sissies are you?"

"Very *big* sissies." said Albert.

"Look." Boone went on, his jaw tight. "Last weekend my sister Kelly and I hiked all over this area. We only ate what we could catch, okay? We slept on the ground. When we found this spot we went crazy. This is a *great* camping spot. You guys are just so spoiled it's unbelievable."

With that, he stomped past them and banged out the outhouse door. Everyone looked at one another, feeling a little guilty and not knowing what to do.

Even though he still looked mad, it was a relief when Boone reopened the screen door and stuck his head back inside. "I need help with the campfire." he said tersely. "*Now*."

The campfire was a circle of stones in a small circular clearing, about a hundred yards in back of the main cabins. Monique tagged after Boone as he lugged charcoals and other equipment out of the van. She didn't seem to be helping him, exactly, just trailing along.

Carly and Paul both gathered firewood and stuck as close to each other as they could. Unfortunately Albert stuck close to both of them.

They had a lot of trouble finding wood that wasn't soggy. But Boone still got the campfire burning beautifully. It's orange light blazed brightly in the fast-falling dusk. And once the first batch of burgers started sizzling on the grill, everyone's spirits began to improve. With the exception of Albert.

"I wonder where Kyle and Suzanne are." he said, fidgeting nervously.

"I know where they are." Boone said. He looked at Paul.

"Like bunnies." they both said in unison. They both laughed and high-fived.

Suddenly, Albert stood up. "I hear someone." he said, looking panic-stricken.

They all listened. Sure enough, there were footsteps approaching, crunching through the brush.

"Uh-oh." Boone said, pretending to be scared. "It's... Jason."

The footsteps kept coming.

"Y-you think it's Kyle and Suzanne?" Albert asked. His right eye twitched.

"Duh." said Paul.

Just then—

Out of the woods came Kyle and Suzanne.

"Sorry." Kyle said sheepishly. "I guess we lost track of the time a little bit."

The two of them looked happy and rumpled; Carly suspected Boone and Paul were right about what they'd been up to.

The first batch of burgers tasted every bit as good as they smelled. Then Boone opened up the cooler and started passing out the beers. Soon everyone was drinking, even Albert. Carly's head began to throb. "Isn't there any diet soda?" she asked peering into the cooler.

"Whoops." Boone said. "I forgot to bring Carly's chocolate milk."

He slapped his thigh and hooted. Then Paul shook up a beer and tried to open it so it sprayed Boone. Soon the two of them were running around the campfire like five-year-olds, trying to spray each

other. They both kept warning each other not to waste the precious beer. Then they would both attack each other all over again.

As far as Carly was concerned, she wished they would waste *all* the precious beer. This was one thing her mother truly didn't need to worry about—Carly becoming an alcoholic. The one time she had tasted beer, she had spit it out.

Well, she couldn't just stand there, looking at the cooler forever. Finally she took out one cold can. It was really tall, like a can of tennis balls. She popped the top and took her first sip. She tried not to twist her mouth into too much of a grimace, but she couldn't help it. The stuff tasted like horse piss—at least the way she imagined horse piss would taste.

"I know." Suzanne told her sympathetically. "It tastes awful at first, but after a while, you get a little drunk and the taste goes away."

"Terrific." Carly said. "I have something to look forward to." Her poor mother would die if she knew she was doing this.

But Suzanne was right. By the time she was halfway through the can, the taste didn't seem quite so bad anymore.

Boone started serving up more food. It must have been the country air. Carly ate two burgers and a hot dog. And by the time they started roasting marshmallows, she had had—for the first time in her life—three beers.

Her head was spinning. It felt good and it felt awful, both at the same time. Members of the group kept wandering off into the woods to pee. But Carly was afraid to get up, afraid she'd start staggering around and embarrass herself.

Well, this is good, she decided. She had always wondered how it felt to be tipsy. Now she knew, and she didn't have to drink this awful stuff ever again.

By now, everyone was getting pretty rowdy. Boone and Monique were draped all over each other. So were Kyle and Suzanne.

"Hey," said Monique, "I've got a game. Everyone has to tell a secret."

There were shouts of protest. Then Boone said, "You first, Monique."

Monique chewed on a tip of her strawberry-blond hair and lowered her eyes coyly. "My last boyfriend, Jean-Claude? Right before I left Paris... we sleep together."

"I'm stunned." Boone said. "*You*?" Boone stood up. He smiled at Carly. The way he was smiling made her very uneasy.

"My secret," he said, "is that I lied to Carly's mom."

There were oohs and ahs from the group. Carly felt her face turn bright red.

"When I called her, I pretended to be Mr. Patrini." Patrini was Parker High social studies teacher. So that was how Boone had gotten permission for Carly to join them!

Boone was laughing in sheer delight at the memory. "I told her that I was coming on the trip as supervisor. She kept saying, 'Oh, Mr. Patrini, that's such a relief!'"

Everyone was hysterical. Carly hated the thought of anyone lying to her mother. Everyone laughed at her mother's expense, that was more than she could bear. She jumped to her feet. "Boone, you are such a total jerk! How *dare* you do that? I mean just who do you think you are?"

"I'm your fairy godmother." Boone said serenely. "I'm trying to show you a good time."

Carly paced around the fire. She felt like stalking off into the woods. But then where would she go?

Paul stood up and grabbed her hand. "C'mon." he told her in a low voice. "Forget it. He's a jerk, what what can you do? You're here now."

Carly began to calm down again. Paul was right. Right now, she didn't have too many options.

"It's nothing compared to the lies he tell me." Monique told her. "He say this is hotel."

Everyone laughed. But no one laughed harder than Boone. Carly felt like punching him.

Paul kept smiling at her in the darkness. "C'mon." he said again. "Sit back down." His stunning blue eyes twinkled with firelight. She sat.

It was pitch dark now except for the glowing red embers and small flickers of the dying campfire. But there was still enough smoke to keep off the mosquitoes. Kyle was tuning up his guitar. He started playing his favorite tunes—the Doors, Beatles, and Stones.

"Don't you know anything current?" Boone asked him. "That stuff is so dead."

"It's the best." Kyle said with an easy smile, and he kept playing softly.

They all huddled in a closer circle around the flame. It wasn't just to feel the fire's heat, thought Carly; the air had gotten only slightly cooler. No, it was the coming of darkness. They were all getting a little scared.

"So," Boone said, "I might as well tell you why I brought you all up here." He took his marshmallow stick, raised it high over his head, and brought it down fast and hard, aiming right at Albert.

Albert screamed at the top of his lungs. Monique screamed too, probably because Albert screamed. Then everyone laughed.

Carly was still pretty mad. "Very mature." she said. "Does that make you feel real strong and macho?"

"Very." Boone agreed, laughing. Then his face got very serious again. "Listen, there's something else I've got to tell you about those murders."

Kyle stopped plucking his guitar mid chord.

"Do you want to tell them or should I?" Boone asked Paul.

"Boone, I don't think—" Paul protested.

"Boone," Monique said, "don't start the scary business. Or I get angry."

"Okay, okay." Boone said. "*Pardonnay mois!* If you don't want to know, you don't want to know."

He only had to wait a few seconds before everyone insisted that he tell. He lowered his voice. "Remember Jason? The boy that drowned?"

The ring of teenaged faces stared back at him, rapt. Carly was mad at herself for even listening, but she couldn't help it. "Well, whenever Jason comes back, you know, comes back from the dead? His face is

rotted and bloated, after all those years in the water. So he wears this white hockey mask to cover it up and—"

Boone raised his marshmallow stick again, very slowly. All eyes were glued to him. But before he could bring the stick slashing down again, Carly started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Albert asked her, amazed. "You think this is funny?"

Carly just laughed harder. Maybe it was the beer, but she wasn't scared anymore. All the fear had just floated away, like a mist. And after the way Boone had made fun of her mom, it felt awfully good to laugh at him. "Oh, Boone." she said. "I'm sorry, but is that the best you can do? A bloated face and a hockey mask?"

"You were scared." Boone said, annoyed. "Don't kid yourself."

Carly didn't answer. She was laughing again. And now everyone began to join in.

Everyone except Albert. Suddenly, the pudgy boy jumped to his feet and yelped, "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!"

Everyone shut up.

"What is?" Monique asked, her pretty button eyes once more showing fear.

Beads of sweat were already popping out all over Albert's round moon-face. "I-I heard something—someone. Coming toward us."

Everyone listened—hard. There were plenty of sounds from the encircling forest, but nothing that sounded like footsteps.

"Albert," Boone said, "don't you want to live to be nineteen? Try and relax a little."

"He's right, man." Kyle agreed. "Go with the flow."

"I'm trying." Albert promised. "But I heard something, I'm telling you. And—I don't know"—he sat down slowly—"I just get this creepy feeling. The way we're all just sitting here, it's like we're being watched, you know?"

"Boone," Paul said, "did you remember to pack the straightjacket?" He slapped his thigh at his own joke.

"I'm serious." Albert insisted. "It's like we're shark bait or something. I feel like there's something out there, you know? Slowly circling around us, waiting for a chance to strike...."

"Maybe it's your mother." Boone suggested, cracking up.

"Yeah, she's mad because you're not going to be around on Mother's Day." Paul chimed in. "And she wants.... *revenge*."

That started everyone laughing again, which meant everyone relaxed. In the midst of the laughter, Carly suddenly realized that she couldn't put off that bathroom trip any longer. She got to her feet. "Be right back." she mumbled. And then, walked with extra care so as not to appear drunk, she went off into the woods to pee.

It's lucky the direction she chose—walking east from the campfire. Because if she had gone the other way, she might have met him face to face.

Twenty yards away, on the other side of the campfire, and hidden in the dark woods—

The hunter stood watching the small group of teenagers.

Under one arm he was holding the heavy cardboard box. His other hand—the one with four fingers—was closed tightly around his gun.

He was breathing heavily through his mask.

9.

Sleep Tight

The group stayed by the campfire until almost midnight. Then Kyle and Suzanne walked off, hand in hand as always. Next Boone yawned very loudly and said he was going to sleep. Monique gave him a questioning look. "I'll walk you back to your cabin." he said.

Right. thought Carly. Looks like I'll be sleeping alone tonight.

When they reached Cabin One, Carly stood at the top of the two wooden steps, looking down at Paul. "Well." she said nervously. The word seemed to get stuck in her throat.

"Well." Paul said. He didn't look like he wanted to leave, but Albert was standing a few yards away, saying. "Paul... c'monnnnn!"

Paul smiled at her, saluting slowly, then turned on his heels and followed Albert into the darkness.

Carly's cheeks were burning. Damn that Albert. If he hadn't have been there, Paul would have kissed her goodnight. She knew it.

She closed the screen door, giving it and extra tug in her frustration. She wished she could lock it, just to be on the safe side. But what would be the point of locking a screen door?

What a night. Her head was spinning, and not just from romantic excitement. She had already had to pee three times; that beer just rushed right through you. She wasn't enjoying the drunk feeling anymore. Just how long did it take to sober up, anyway? Or would she feel like this for the next week.

Then she turned.

And then she knew she wasn't alone.

When her eyes adjusted to the darkness she saw Monique, sitting on one of the lower bunks.

"Where is Boone?" Carly asked, surprised.

"He want to be alone?" Monique sounded very depressed.

"Ah. Well, that's Boone for you." Which it was. He could get moody and wander off for hours. Well, let him wander off and never come back for all Carly cared.

Moving slowly and with her hands in front of her, Carly made her way to where she had left her bags—and her large flashlight.

"I hate this cabin." Monique said grumpily.

Carly played the flashlight beam across the cabin's dingy walls. The place did look pretty awful.

"I've god an idea." Carly said. Wow! She was slurring her words; how embarrassing. Luckily, Monique didn't seem to notice. "Why don't we do some decorating?" Carly suggested, enunciating each word carefully.

"Decorating?" Monique sneered. "You are silly. It's pitch dark."

"So?"

Carly unzipped her carryall and pulled out a shirt. Then she went to inspect the windows. One of the windows had a rusty curtain rod. She tucked in one end of the shirt over the rod, letting the rest of the material hang down. "See." she told Monique. "Now we have curtains, at least for one of the windows."

Next Carly used some extra sheets her mom had made her pack, draping them over the two prison-like bunk beds the girls weren't using. At least the sheets hid some of that ugly metal. By then even Monique was getting into the project. She opened up her backpack and started arranging her various appliances on the window ledges—a hair dryer, a hair curler, an electric makeup mirror, an iron, a jewelry box. No wonder Paul had had trouble lifting the pack!

The two girls laughed happily as they became engrossed in their task. Their laughter carried outside the cabin, where a figure was slowly approaching through the darkness. Whoever it was, he place his black boots down carefully—heel to toe—to reduce the sound of his approach.

When the two girls set up their sleeping bags, Monique immediately insisted on taking the bottom bunk. Carly didn't mind. Somehow she felt safer up here, away from that grimy floor. She tried not to think about the bugs that would slither their way across that floor while she slept.

Carly climbed up to the upper bunk and lay down. She tried closing her eyes, but the room started spinning so she opened them again. She wondered if tomorrow she'd have her very first hangover.

This business of being a bad girl—somehow it just didn't agree with her.

Monique's husky voice floated up to her. "So, you have the hots for Paul, no?"

Carly leaned her head over the edge of the bed and grinned down at Monique through the darkness. She was glad Monique couldn't see her blush. "I have the hots for Paul, yes."

"He is good-looking. But I think Boone is the sexy one, no? He is so wild."

"Yeah." Carly said bitterly. "Too wild."

"Well," Monique said, " I guess we should sleep." She started wriggling out of her tight jeans. She stopped abruptly. "Did you hear something?"

"No. Why?"

They both listened. Finally, Monique sighed. "I am not going to sleep so hot, I think."

"I know what you mean." Carly sat up on the edge of the bed. She unlaced one sneaker and let it drop to the floor with a clunk. "I guess Suzanne is right. We're not used"—*clunk!* She dropped the other sneaker—"to the country."

For the moment, they both sat silently on their bunks, listening to the sounds of the night.

Then Monique asked, "You mind I smoke in here?"

Carly hated cigarette smoke. She had read somewhere that you could get lung disease just from being near people who were smoking. She was about to say yes, but then she thought about what Boone said, about her being such a goody-goody. "Go ahead." she said in what she hoped would sound like a careless tone of voice.

A match flared. She smelled smoke. She tried not to cough.

"Carly?"

She looked down. Monique was frowning , the tip of her cigarette glowing orange.

"What?" Carly asked.

"If I sleep with my teddy bear, you won't tell on me, will you?"

Carly felt stunned. Monique? With a teddy bear? But she answered, "Of course not." without a hint of teasing. Looking closer,

she saw that Monique was already clutching a little fuzzy brown bear.

"My mother give it to me when I leave home this year." The French girl admitted. "It helps me sleep."

Carly smiled. And here she had thought of Monique as so sophisticated. "Well," she said, with a warm smile, "sleep tight."

"Thanks." Monique said softly. "You have a tight sleep too."

Carly laughed. She checked her watch: half past twelve. She undid the brown leather band and hung it on a nail she found sticking out of the wooden cabin wall. She was about to click off her flashlight when she spotted the inscription on the rafter over her head. Jamie *and Mick, Forever. 1953*. The words had been carved inside a heart.

She moved her flashlight along the beam, reading more of the graffiti that had been carved up here. There were so many names. And if what Boone said was true, about Jason and everything, then Jamie and Mick's love probably hadn't lasted forever. Nowhere near. Carly shivered hard, trying to put the thought from her mind.

She decided to leave the flashlight on for a second, while she undressed. She set a large plastic box next to her. Then she reached down and began to unbutton her blouse. But with the flashlight in this position, it's large white beam was pointing across the cabin at one of the screen windows, the one she hadn't covered.

The beam lit up the face of the man staring in.

10

Visitors

Carly almost fell off the bed. She gasped. Monique screamed.

And then Carly realized who it was.

"Hi." Paul said with that sexy grin of his. "Didn't mean to startle you."

"How long have you been standing there?" Monique demanded.

"Just got here." Paul said with a smirk. "Why?" he asked. "What'd I miss?"

"That's for us to know and you to find out." Monique purred.

So much for her new friendship with Monique, thought Carly. Now Monique's making a play for Paul, even though she knows I'm interested.

"So, Paul," Monique asked, what's going on?"

"Nothing's going on.... yet." Paul answered suggestively. But then he looked back up at Carly. "It's really pretty out, Carly. The moon's almost full and the stars are out. I was kind of hoping you could come out for a little walk. You know, down by the lake."

Carly felt a tingling sensation that covered her entire body. Her heart was beating loudly, as if someone were knocking relentlessly inside her chest. Paul Sexton wanted to go for a midnight walk—with *her*.

"Just a sec." she said. She jumped down from the bunk and fumbled with her shoes and laces, her fingers feeling suddenly thick and clumsy. She was all set to go when she remembered Monique. Carly couldn't help it. Being nice was an old habit, and hard to break. She crossed to Monique's bed. "Monique," she whispered, "do you mind if I leave you alone for a few minutes? Be honest. If you mind, I won't go."

"I only mind he asked you, not me." Monique whispered, and even in the dark Carly could see the girl's grin. "Go for it." she added, grabbing her hand.

Again the screen door creaked open. Again it banged shut. Carly stepped out into the night.

And then the large strong hands lunged out at her from the darkness and grabbed her.

"Gotcha!" Paul said.

She stared at him too stunned to speak. She barely escaped screaming.

He took her hand. "This way."

***

All alone in Cabin Six, Albert lay on his back in his huge Day-Glo orange sleeping bag. He had set up his bed on one of the bottom bunks. With no mattress, the bed's metal springs were digging into his back.

Boy, I really need this, Albert told himself. I really needed to come all this way up here in order to be all by myself in the middle of the night in the middle of the woods. "I needed this like I needed a hole in my head." he muttered aloud.

Bored and annoyed, he clicked his flashlight on, off, on, off. And then—quickly—on again.

Before getting into bed, he had gone down to the lake with his black leather toiletry bag, flossed carefully, then brushed his teeth with lake water. He hated putting the mossy bilge in his mouth, but he couldn't go the night without brushing. He'd have dentist nightmares the whole night.

On his way back to camp Paul had jumped out at him from behind a tree and scared him senseless. What a nice guy. What a wonderful and supportive roommate. Maybe when Albert got back to school he'd go see the dean and beg for the second time to be transferred to a single room. Maybe if he cried this time, the dean would relent.

After all, Paul had a different girl in the room almost every night. He made Albert sleep on the living room sofa too. And then he made so much noise he kept Albert awake and frustrated most of the night.

Albert pictured Paul's cocky grin. When he ran into him tonight, Paul had said, "Guess where I'm going?" Then he leered and said, "Carly, Carly, here I come!" He had smacked his lips as if he were about to devour a tasty dessert.

Paul Sexton—total sleeze bucket.

Of course Albert was dying to trade places with him. That's why I wanted to come on this tripin the first place, he reminded himself. To meet girls. He groaned. Why couldn't he be sleaze bucket-for-a-day?

Because he didn't have the confidence or the nerve, he answered himself. With a sad smile, he added, So many girls, so little courage.

Albert turned off his flashlight and placed it carefully on the floor. Almost at once, he picked it up again, clicked it on, and shone it around the room. As if an intruder could have slipped into the cabin in that half-instant! He sighed at his own cowardice. Then he clicked off the flashlight one last.

He grunted as he shifted uncomfortably in his sleeping bag. It seemed he had no choice. He could either have the springs digging into his left side or his right side.

Some choice.

He was in the middle of turning over for what seemed like the hundredth time when—

He heard footsteps.

Everything in his body tensed. He turned his head so sharply he pulled a muscle in his neck.

Albert had always been terrified of burglars. Sometimes as a kid back in Providence he got so scared at night that in the morning he was sure he had fainted himself back to sleep. But in all his years of childhood, the sounds he heard at night had never turned out to be anything more serious than the cat or the wind or a branch blowing in the wind or—

Oh, God. This time there was no denying it—the footstep steps were real.

And they were coming right toward his cabin.

Oh, God, oh, God, thought Albert.

And then the intruder crept softly up the two wooden steps right outside the cabin door.

The door creaked open.

"Boone?" It was a soft girl's voice.

It took a moment for the relief to take over; for a second, Albert remained too scared to answer.

The door swung open noisily, then banged shut. "I look all over." the girl said, entering the cabin. "All these empty cabins. So creepy. Carly went off with Paul, you know, and I... get scared all by myself. You're not sleeping are you, Boone?"

"What? Oh, no, no."

There was a stunned silence. Then a flashlight clicked on, shining right in Albert's face. He tried to grin winningly. "Hi, Monique." he said.

He could see the beautiful French girl only dimly in the spill of light from her flash. But he could still make out the curves of her stunning body. He felt woozy with excitement at the thought of her in his cabin, even if it was a mistake.

"Where is Boone sleep?" she asked.

"Uh, gee." Albert said. "I wish I knew. I didn't see which cabin he picked. But this campsite is huge, you know? He could be almost anywhere. Uh, I don't think you should go around looking for him tonight. I don't think it's really safe." He pause, pretending to think. "Hey, listen." he said. "I've got an idea! There's loads of bed in here, if you want to stay."

His heart was pounding as he said it. But what was the worst thing she could do to him for making such a suggestion? Shoot him?

Her answer made his heart pound twice as hard. "Aw," she said, "that is sweet of you. Why is it that chubby boys like you are always such sweetie-pies?"

"I don't know." Albert said, with a nervous giggle.

Monique moved closer. She sat on the edge of the bed. Now Albert's heart was pounding triple time. Please, please, please—Albert prayed silently along with each beat of his heart. Please let me kiss you!

"You know, I get so lonely at night." Monique said softly, batting her eyelids.

"Of course you do." Albert said. "Who doesn't?" With my luck, Albert told himself, she'll agree to kiss me, but then I'll be so excited I'll have a heart attack and die before it happens.

"Oh, Albert." Monique said, running her fingers through his bristly dark hair. "Everyone tease you but I—I like you. I think you good

person."

"I am." Albert said at once.

"You are very kind—hearted."

"And you." Albert said. "You are the prettiest girl I've ever seen."

"Oh you see?" Monique said. "This is just what I mean, about how sweet you are."

"Monique?" His voice had gone up six octaves and was coming out in a scratchy whisper.

"Yes, Albert?"

"Could I... could I... could I... um..."

She laughed. "You want to kiss me?"

He was stunned. Too stunned to speak. He only nodded.

Slowly, slowly, slowly, she lowered her beautiful head toward his. He luscious red lips were only millimeters from his own...

Suddenly she sprang back.

"Wh-what is it?" Albert stammered.

"A worm!" Monique cried. She backed away farther, pointing at his forehead.

Dazed and confused, Albert reached up to feel his forehead. He wasn't expecting to feel smooth skin. He knew he was sweating. And he knew that his forehead was always where he had his worst pimple problem. But what he *wasn't* expecting to feel was this thick slimy lump.

A lump? In one sickening second he realized that the lump was not part of his own body. He squeezed the slimy flesh and yanked. There was a loud pop as the worm came off in his hand.

Monique shone he light on the huge bug that wriggled slowly on his palm. It was just like the worm he had seen that evening, sliding slowly through the grass. The worm was toad-belly white. And lining it's tiny gaping mouth was a circle of tiny but razor-sharp teeth.

Monique screamed. "You're bleeding!"

It was true. He could feel the blood gushing down his forehead. But it was as if he were paralyzed. He couldn't move.

Monique's mouth opened as if to let out another piercing cry. But no sound came out. She was pointing. "There's another one!" she finally gasped. "And another! Albert! Look! Look!"

With a calmness that amazed himself, Albert reached down and unzipped his sleeping bag.

Well, how about that, he thought with a voice of almost insane reasonableness. Monique was right. There *were* more worms. In fact, his entire body was swarming with them.

Albert looked closer. The worms seemed to be in a feeding frenzy. And how do you like that? All that was left of his legs were the bones.

11

Skinny-Dipping

"Noooooooooooooo!"

Albert woke up with a shout. He was sweating heavily, his breath coming in gasps.

It took him several moments before he could calm down, before he could convince himself that the worms weren't real.

Wow! What an awful nightmare!

The worms aren't real! He repeated to himself about twenty times. The worms aren't real!

But as he calmed down, he began to realize something else that wasn't real—Monique's visit. The gorgeous French girl with eyes like dark buttons had not stopped by his cabin after all. Had not said any of those nice things. Probably wouldn't say them in a million years.

Albert groaned and hit the sleeping bag with his fist. Another mistake. The sharp springs under the bag pinched his hand like metal claws. He gave a cry of pain, but it was really more a cry of frustration.

Carly liked Paul. Monique liked Boone. Kyle and Suzanne were joined at the hip like Siamese twins. Who did that leave for Albert?

No one, that's who. He was so frustrated he felt like going outside and howling at the moon.

On the other hand, he was beginning to feel sleepy again. He closed his eyes and was asleep again before he knew it.

And then...

The fat white worm attached to his forehead finished feeding and slimed on its way.

***

Carly considered pulling her hand away from Paul. But only briefly. The truth was she had never felt anything so delicious in her life. Only their hands were touching, but it was as if their entire bodies were wrapped around each other, that was how exciting it felt.

They both had flashlights, which helped them pick their way along the narrow trail to the lake. They didn't talk much, which only increased the tension and the excitement between them. Walking through the darkness in silence—it seemed more intimate somehow, especially since they were holding hands.

After a few minutes, the trail widened. Then they went around a corner and there was the camp's old gray dock. The dark waters of Crystal Lake spread out before them, the water shimmering and rippling in the moonlight.

"Crystal Lake sure is beautiful." Carly murmured.

"Just like you." Paul said softly.

That did it—Carly could feel that Jell-O feeling coming on, as if her whole body were trembling. She was helpless. She was his.

"You don't see stars like this anywhere but in the country." Paul said, looking up.

It was true. The sky was clear as a bell, curving over their heads like a dark glass dome.

"It's going to be a beautiful day tomorrow." Paul predicted.

"Hmm." was all Carly could manage. Right now, she couldn't think about tomorrow, couldn't think about anything except *now now now!*

"Hey." he said softly. He waited until she looked up at him. He was looking down at her, smiling gently, tenderly. He was so handsome, it was hard to look at him directly. It was as if he were this bright light and you had to shield your eyes. Carly felt faint. She had trouble believing this was really happening.

But it was.

Then Paul started moving even closer. He put those large strong hands of his on her shoulders, all the time staring into her eyes as if he were hypnotizing her.

And then his mouth was on hers.

No kiss had ever felt like this before, her body was melting into his.

A soft moan escaped her, a grateful gasp as if her body were thanking her for finally giving it what it had always wanted. His powerful arms were around her now. And then, as he kissed her some more, he suddenly lowered her halfway down to the ground

like a swing dancer doing a dip. That meant she had to wrap her arms around his muscular neck to keep her balance. She didn't mind.

And then he was lowering her the rest of the way, down to the ground.

The ground was a lot harder than she expected. Just because she was feeling like she was melting, that didn't mean there weren't rocks on the ground and hard-packed dirt. And Paul was on top of her, his heavy weight pressing down, crushing her.

"Paul," she began. But Paul kept his mouth pressed on hers, making it hard for her to talk. And now his hands began roaming her body, not gentle anymore, pulling—ripping—at the buttons of her blouse. Panic was quickly replacing her excitement. For a moment, she had the weird sensation of being an object of prey.

"Paul!" she said sharply.

He pulled his head back, looking innocent and surprised. "What's wrong?" he asked kindly.

Had she been wrong to stop him? Her head was swimming. He looked gentle, harmless. "there are rocks here." she said lamely.

"Oh! Sorry! That must've felt good!" Paul chuckled. "Not!"

She sat up and managed a smile. He sat beside her as she closed the blouse buttons he had managed to open. "Also," she said, lowering her head shyly, "I hardly know you."

Even as she said it, she felt a searing stab of shame. At moments like these her own virginity seemed like a big rock she had to wear around her neck. Suddenly, and for the first time in her life, she wished she were someone else.

"That's true." he said. "I hardly know you." He cocked his head and peered into her eyes. "But somehow I feel like I've known you all my life, you know what I mean?"

She nodded. She did know. He grabbed her sneakered foot and shook it "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do." he assured her.

Then she started walking his fingers up her bare calf.

"Thanks for saying that." she said, catching his fingers with her hand.

Now his other hand was walking up the other leg. "I don't want to rush you." he said in that same reassuring voice.

She got to her knees. "Thanks." she said again. She was feeling horribly foolish and unsure. Paul Sexton had probably never been with so clumsy or inexperienced or shy a girl in his life, she told herself. Despite his serious expression, he must be laughing at her. Not only that, she had a feeling he was getting angry, too.

But his smile didn't fade. If anything, it broadened. "Hey," he said, standing up, "I've got a great idea."

Somehow she didn't think she was going to think his idea was so great. "What?" Her voice was a whisper.

He nodded his head at the broad dark lake.

She had no idea what he meant. "What?" she asked again, feeling frustrated that she didn't get it, as if she were failing an important test.

"A midnight swim."

Her mouth dropped open into a small o.

"How about it?" he asked.

"I don't swim." she said quickly.

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

A little annoyance finally began to play across his rugged features. "Oh, come on. Everybody knows how to swim."

"Not when your mother is terrified of you drowning and won't let you even take lessons, you don't." said Carly. She laughed nervously.

Paul put his hands on his hips, thinking. "I'll give you a lesson."

"Oh, no." she said quickly.

"C'mon, Carly. You can't put off your life forever."

That hurt. "I'm not putting it off." Carly said. "Anyway, my mom's not so bad, she just wants me safe."

"I've got a little secret for you. The only time you're safe—really safe—is when you're dead." Paul offered her his hand. She took it and pulled her up. "just a quick dip." he said. "you'll love it. Okay?"

Carly bit her lip. "I don't have a suit." was all she could think to say.

"That's the best part of my plan." Paul said with a grin.

She felt herself redden. "What do you mean?"

"There's no one around, Carly. No one around here for miles. It's the middle of the night. See what I'm saying? We don't need suits."

Her skin felt as if it were covered with prickles. "You mean skinny-dip?"

Paul nodded. He watched her, waiting, a tiny grin on his face. He didn't move, though. That was smart, because if he had stepped toward her then, she would never have unbuttoned a single button. He doesn't think I can do it. she thought.

And then, as scared as she felt, Carly felt a sudden impulse to go for it. Just rip off her clothes, run and jump in the water. She fingered the top button of her blouse.

"Chicken?" he asked. There was a nasty edge to his voice.

She undid the first button. Her fingers were trembling.

"That's it." he said.

It was hard to see Paul's expression in the darkness, but it almost looked as if he was sneering.

She undid a second button.

A third.

Then she closed it again.

"I don't feel right about this." she said.

He sighed. "Carly," he said, "you're pathetic."

"Thanks a lot." she said, feeling the hurt and anger swirl through her. "I-I just don't want to rush into anything."

"Oh. And when will you be ready, huh? Two thousand years from now?"

"No." she said. Why was he being so mean? "Maybe some other time."

"Oh, right." Paul said. "I mean, when are we going to have this chance again?"

And then he reached down and pulled his striped rugby jersey right over his head. He let the shirt drop to the ground. "It's now or never." he said.

Carly blinked. She had never seen a body like his, at least not this close. He had muscles everywhere, they went all the way down his stomach in little ridges.

The way he kept running his hands over his chest, Paul seemed to admire his body as much as she did. Then he reached down and undid the belt buckle on his pants.

"Paul," she said, "stop it."

Paul was standing in between her and the path back to camp, smiling at her. The smile seemed totally mean now. Suddenly, she felt clearheaded and sober, and the only thing she wanted to do was get out of there.

She started forward, but he blocked her way, dodging back and forth as she tried to get around him. He was laughing, a mean, teasing laugh. "I'm not letting you go." he threatened.

"Paul." she said firmly. "I'm not going to go skinny-dipping with you. Get it? Now let me by."

Paul's smile was frozen on his face. "You're such a baby." he said. "You know that? I mean, it's amazing."

"Let me go."

"You're worse than Albert." he said harshly. "I can't believe I wasted any time on you. When I could have been with Monique!"

Carly's ears were burning; it felt as if all the heat in her body had suddenly rushed to her head. "I'm sorry if I wasted a few minutes of your very busy schedule." she said, trying not to cry.

"Believe me, you're not going to get a second chance."

She didn't bother to answer. Just waited until he finally stepped aside and let her by. He bowed and gestured as if to say, be my guest.

She started up the path, walking as fast as she could. She had only gone a few yards when she heard the zip. He had finished taking off his pants.

The last thing she heard as she started up the path was Paul shouting happily and the splash as he entered the water. It was a struggle, but she forced herself not to look back.

Hurt and angry, she walked fast. Soon she was deep in the dark woods. And then she started getting this awful feeling—this feeling that she was not alone.

C'mon, Carly, she told herself. Don't start getting scared now.

She swept the flashlight beam through the woods on either side of her. The white light seemed eerie, the way it lit up the plants and

trees in the middle of the darkness.

And then—

She heard the squish of heavy boots on soggy leaves.

She slowed her steps. Heard nothing. Kept going. Look at you, she chided herself. Paul was right, she *was* a scaredy-cat.

Full moon or not, it was dark. The thick threes blocked out almost all light. But it was only a five minute walk to the cabin. Carly told herself she could make it five minutes without freaking out too—

A branch cracked.

Was it the wind? No, there was no mistaking it now. Someone was following her.

She stopped short, listening hard, her breath coming out in short gasps.

But even over the sound of her own breathing, she could hear it now. The slight wheezing breath of—

"Paul?"

She turned sharply, shining the light back the way she had come.

There was no answer.

"I swear, Paul." she said. "If you're trying to scare me, I will kill you. Do you hear me? You've already given me enough trouble for one night. Paul?"

Still no answer.

And then, something rustled nearby.

Her head felt like it was coming off, she was so scared.

Something—someone—was thrashing in the woods, coming hard now, running right at her!

Carly turned and started running as well. Thin branches whipped her from all sides. A vine lashed her right in the face. But she didn't stop, because whoever was chasing her was quickly gaining ground.

She ran faster, pumping her arms and—

She hit a tree stump and fell hard, the ground coming up to smack her. Her flashlight landed with a crack on a nearby rock. Its light pointed up meaninglessly, up the pale white bark of a birch tree.

She was crying now, she was so scared. Her whole body felt numb. She scrambled to her feet and kept running, flailing her limbs wildly.

But she must've run in the wrong direction.

Because she ran right into the killer's arms.

12

Meditating

"Help me! Help!"

Carly was screaming at the top of her lungs. She had no control over it. The sound just gushed out of her.

The killer's dark eyes gleamed down hatefully from behind his white hockey mask, offering no mercy. With one strong hand, he grabbed a whole handful of her shirt. With his other hand, he raised an enormous hunting knife high in the air over her head. Even in the darkness of the woods, she could see the silvery glint of the long blade.

And then he brought the knife down. Hard.

He stopped the knife an inch away from her chest. Then he removed his mask.

"You see." Boone said. "You *were* scared after all." then he howled like a lunatic.

For an instant, Carly remained frozen. Then the anger came in a rush and she pushed him away with all her might. He banged into a tree, his head hitting the bark with an audible thud. It didn't stop his laughter, though. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. "Help! Help!" he mimicked, barely able to speak. He looked down at the mask in his hand. "I knew this thing would come in handy."

Carly was trembling all over, with fear, with relief, with rage. She pointed a shaky finger right into Boone's face. "Grow up and get a life!"

She barely got the words out before she burst into tears. Weeping, she headed off into the darkness without looking back.

"Hey, you forgot your flashlight." Boone called.

She didn't answer. She didn't stop.

Saturday morning at Crystal Lake, the sun rose in the clear sky. Paul Sexton's prediction had come true. It was going to be a beautiful sunny day. In the woods around the lake, all seemed peaceful.

Too peaceful.

And then, at just a few minutes after eight, a burst of noise shattered the calm.

Heavy Metal music began blasting from the trees near the old campsite. First Motorhead, then the Chainsaw Kittens—the jarring sounds were totally out of place in the woodsy setting.

After about ten minutes of this bizarre concert, the group of teenagers staying at Crystal Lake campgrounds slowly straggled down to the lake to see what was up. They found Boone high up in a tree, wearing only gym shorts and smeared with sap. He had just finished rigging the last of his speakers. "Now how's that for a wake-up call?" he asked them all proudly. He gave a war cry and shouted, "Let the games begin!"

***

John Starr was oh so rich and oh so handsome. And as Rosalynn embraced John for the first time, she realized he was also so warm, so kind, so wonderful. So this, so that. Carly turned her romance novel face down on the dock. Only in books, she thought bitterly.

Lifting her head, she watched Paul and Boone chasing and splashing after Monique as the tree teenagers cavorted in the water. In real life, people who were good-looking as Paul got constant attention. They never learned how to be decent human beings.

So far it had been a lazy, all-right day, everyone just hanging out at the dock and in the water, soaking up rays. Carly wasn't really enjoying herself, though.

"Hey, Car." Suzanne called from the edge of the dock.

"What?"

"You want to meditate with us?"

Carly squinted through the bright midday sun. Sure enough, Kyle was already in the lotus position, his feet tucked underneath him, his hands resting on his thighs, his fingers making "okay" signs. Suzanne was sitting next to him, sunning herself on a tie-dyed sheet. How were they planning on meditating with Boone's heavy-metal music blaring down on them?

"Maybe later." she called.

The truth was, she had no desire to meditate—except on what had happened last night between her and Paul. She wished she and Suzanne could go off somewhere and talk things over. But there was no way Suz could be separated from her precious Kyle, not even for a minute. Carly made a mental vow that when she got into a serious relationship she wouldn't abandon her girlfriends the way Suzanne had.

For the last twenty minutes, Albert had been swimming slow, short laps all by himself right near the dock. His "workout," he called it; he looked more like a bored polar bear at the zoo. Now he climbed out and came dripping down the dock toward Carly. As soon as he finished toweling off, he started swearing himself with Coppertone sunscreen thirty.

He was wearing bright blue swim trunks. Against that blue, his skin looked ridiculously white—almost as white as two strange worms Kyle had spotted inching along the dock this morning. Poor Albert, Carly knew her mother would say it was superficial of her, but there was no way she could ever go out with someone like him. Even though she really did think he was nice—even lovable.

"How about you, Albert?" Kyle called. "You want to meditate?"

"No thanks, O swami." Albert said. "I don't believe in relaxing."

Kyle laughed. "Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"I have to stay on guard in case something's trying to me me."

Carly visored a hand over her eyes and stared at Albert. "Looks like something got you already." she said gently. "What's that on your forehead?"

"I know, can you believe it?" Albert nervously fingered the red welt on his forehead. "It's not a pimple, though. I think it's some kind of bite from one of these weird country bugs they've got up here."

"You're getting paranoid, man." said Kyle.

"I know." Albert agreed. "But you know what they say. Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean there isn't an enemy hiding behind the trees." He peered off at the thick mass of pine trees that crowded the edge of the lake on all sides. "Speaking of which, am I the only one who feels like we're being watched?"

There was a shout from the water. Carly turned to see Boone, about a hundred yards away, dragging something large and brown out of the dense reeds at the water's edge. "It's a canoe!" Boone yelled.

"All right!" shouted Paul.

Carly flicked her green bikini top back into position and looked away. Boone and Paul could rot as far as she was concerned.

"It's even got a paddle." Boone yelled. "See? And you guys were complaining that there wasn't any equipment. C'mon, Monique. You and I are going to take it out for a little spin, then somebody else can have a turn."

Despite herself, Carly turned to watch. Monique had been swimming with Paul most of the morning, but now she hesitated, standing in the shallow water, looking back and forth at both Paul and Boone. Decisions, decisions. Finally, she plopped back in the water and started doing her ridiculous dog paddle as she headed toward Boone and the canoe.

Carly felt a delicious moment of triumph. As mad as she was at Boone, she was even madder at Paul. And Monique had picked Boone over Paul.

She watched Boone help Monique into the boat, kept watching until Boone had paddled out of sight.

Now there were only five teenagers hanging out at the dock at Crystal Lake.

Paul swam back to shore with long, expert strokes. He strode up the dock. His skin was a perfect bronze all over, as if he had been dipping in tan.

He fell face-first toward the wood. Suzanne gasped. Then, at the last second, he stuck out one strong arm to stop himself. He started doing one-arm pushups, his powerful muscles glistening with water, and then with sweat.

Carly turned her book over and resumed reading, though she found she kept reading the same sentence over and over.

Albert was struggling to get his hand down to the small of his back. "Hey, Carly." he called. He held up the greasy tube of sunblock. "Would you help me out here? I can't reach a spot."

Paul jumped to his feet and started stretching his hands behind his back so hard that his joints cracked. "Get real, Harris." he taunted. "No one wants to smear that stuff on you."

Carly put her book down again. She glared in Paul's direction, then smiled at Albert. "I'd be glad to help."

"Wow, thanks." Albert said, looking shocked. With fingers, Carly gingerly took the greasy tube from his greasy hand. She started smearing the gooey white stuff all over Albert's back in slow strokes. Albert moaned happily. "Wow." he said again. "I'm in heaven. Can you believe it? This is my first massage."

"We believe it." Paul said.

Out of the corner of her eye, Carly could see Paul as he angrily watched the scene. She kept rubbing on ointment. Finally Paul clasp his hands together so loudly Carly jumped.

"Okay." he said. "Who wants to go for a jog around the lake?"

No one answered.

"C'mon, we've got to get you lasy bones in shape. What do you say, Albert? Want to drop ten or seventy pounds?"

"Only on your head."

Paul laughed, but it wasn't a nice laugh. "Kyle and Suzanne?" he asked.

Kyle shook his head. "I'd love to, man, but we've given up jogging. Suzanne read in her wellness journal that it's bad for the joints and it shakes up your internal organs."

Paul didn't look too disappointed. "Carly?" he asked in an offhanded way, not to look right at her.

"What?" She didn't look at him either.

"I promise I'll go really slow," Paul said, "so you can keep up."

Carly snorted. "Believe me"—she jutted her jaw out—"I can keep up."

"Carly's running track these days." Suzanne said. "You better watch out."

"Oooh, I'm really scared." Paul said, covering himself with both hands and pretended to cower.

Carly bit her lip and ordered herself to keep quiet. But the moment she got through giving her the order, she turned and snapped at

Paul. "You *should* be scared. I could beat you any day."

Paul just laughed. "Carly, looks like we got ourselves a race."

Carly stood up. Albert said quickly, "Carly, don't let him bully you into doing something you don't want to do, I mean—"

"It's okay, Albert." she said. She pulled on her red tanktop, then crouched down and picked up her paperback.

"Don't forget to stretch." Paul said, waggling his finger at her playfully.

"Thanks for the tip. I've got to get my sneakers." she said as she stalked past Paul. She headed off the dock and up the trail without looking back.

Paul turned and looked down at Albert. 'You missed a spot." he said pointing at Albert's big belly. When Albert looked down, Paul zipped his finger right up into Albert's face. "Gotcha." he said. Then he started jogging after Carly.

Now there were only three teenagers at the dock of Crystal Lake.

"Great," Albert whined, "I'm all alone as usual."

"Hey, *we're* still here." Kyle pointed out.

"I'm sorry I ever came up here, you know that?" Albert said.

Kyle said, "I'm telling you, dude, meditation is the answer."

"Yeah," Albert said, "but what's the question? Look, thanks for the offer, but I think I'm going to go into town."

Kyle and Suzanne both looked equally horrified. "Town?" they asked in unison. Then they both looked at each other and laughed.

" Yeah, you know. Town. It's a place where people live. I don't know about you, but I miss civilization. And I want to use the pay phone at the gas station." Albert pulled on his white Computer Club T-shirt, his head getting lost for a moment as he tried to find the right hole. "You don't think that's too long a walk do you?" he asked from under the shirt. "I mean, I won't get sunstroke or something?"

"Only if you keep worrying." Suzanne advised him with a smile.

"You're right." Albert agreed. "I worry so much that it worries me." Giggling at his own joke, he started off down the dock.

Now there were only two teenagers hanging out on the dock at Crystal Lake.

"Well, Suz, looks like they've abandoned us." Kyle said, after Albert lumbered out of sight up the trail.

Suzanne rested her head on his shoulder, and he rest his head on top of hers. "I like it better this way." she murmured.

"Me too."

He patted her long red hair and she smiled. Kyle smiled back. They were perfect together, he thought. It was like, whatever she felt, he felt.

"Okay," she said, "let's get started." She stood up and sat down again, positioning herself in the lotus position with her back right up against Kyle's. He felt the pressure of her back against his; it was as if they were one being. He closed one nostril with the thumb of his right hand. So did Suzanne. "And breathe in." he said.

They both breathed in. "And hold." he instructed, clamping his nose shut.

The both held their breath, then let out the air on a count of five, following the instructions Kyle had read in his yoga book.

They both closed their eyes and focused on their breathing. Soon they were both holding their breath longer and longer counts, and letting the air out more and more slowly. After a few minutes, Kyle began silently saying his mantra to himself, saying the word "Om" each time he felt himself exhale.

"Ommmm. Ommmm. Ommmm."

Kyle's breathing slowed down so much that he could barely tell the difference between breathing in and breathing out.

The first time he got distracted was when he heard the splashes somewhere off in the water.

Must be a fish, he thought.

Or Boone or Monique.

In the yoga book, it said that while meditating your mind often wandered. Whenever you noticed this happening, you were supposed to gently remind yourself to put your focus back on your mantra.

Kyle gently put his mind back on his mantra. *Ommmm,* he thought to himself. *Ommmm. Omm—*

More splashing, closer this time, distracting him again.

What a big fish!

But that was another distracting thought. He gently reminded himself he should put his mind back on—

Ommmm. *Ommmm*. *Ommmm*.

A minute later, Kyle had entered what he and Suzanne called the mystical zone. In this state it was as if one became one with the oneness of self. Everything else vanished—all sense of body, all physical sensations, all distractions from the outside world. Kyle felt himself floating up into the bright blue sky. He thought he could sit and meditate forever.

Maybe he could have. Because he didn't lose his concentration again. Not once. At least, not until the hunter slit his throat from ear to ear.

13

Albert Phones Home

"C'mon, Carly.... You know what they say... no pain, no gain!"

Paul was about twenty yards down the dirt path, jogging in place. He was grinning that annoying, taughting grin of his. And he was bringing his knees way up high as he jogged, showing off how much energy he had left.

Carly stood with her arms akimbo, wheezing slightly with each breath. She could feel the droplets of sweat running down her sides and back. She had wanted to show Paul up so badly. As a result, she had pushed herself way too hard.

"C'mon." he called again. "You've at least gotta keep running until I break a sweat."

This is why gun control is a good idea, Carly told herself. Because if I had a gun right now, I would shoot him. "I've—had enough." she said. "You win. You're in—better shape."

"Only one way to fix that. Keep on jogging!" Paul pumped his legs up and down in an amazing blur of speed.

She didn't bother to answer. She just turned and started trudging back toward camp.

"You want me to come with you?' he called.

"No thanks." she answered without turning around. "I don't want to mess up your workout."

Carly forced herself to keep moving as she tried to walk off the pain. Slowly but surely, her breathing began to ease back to normal; the pain knifing into her side turning into a dull throb. The pain in her heart was lessening as well.

What a difference a day makes, she thought. Yesterday she still looked up to Boone. Now she was sick of him. Yesterday she thought Paul was to die for. Today she couldn't believe she had ever made out with the guy. What had she seen in him?

Well, that was easy. Paul had the body of a Greek god. Only trouble: it seemed that no one worshipped Paul as much as Paul did.

It's okay, she comforted herself. No real harm done. So she'd had herself a little adventure. She needed more of those, not less. Now she'd go back to camp, read her book, relax a little, and stay inside the cabin until the danger hours of intense sunshine had passed.

She smiled as she walked, lazily pulling some berries off a bush that hung over the trail. She felt in control of herself. You see, Mom, she said silently, there was nothing to worry about after all.

***

This was another major mistake, Albert thought as he plodded along a dirt road through the woods. The trip from the gas station to the camp had seemed like nothing when they were riding in the car. On foot, the hike felt endless.

He was sweating profusely. Under his arms, on his back, around his neck—well, everywhere, basically. His pudgy thighs had been rubbing together as he walked and now were painfully sore. His feet ached inside his ratty old sneakers.

And, as if Albert weren't uncomfortable enough, mosquitoes—big fat ones—kept buzzing his ear and dive-bombing down into his face.

He was so tired he was ready to lie down in the middle of the road. But there were probably strange creatures around here that would come trotting out of the woods and start chewing down on his body while he slept. He forced himself onward.

And then he turned the next corner and he saw the beginning of the paved road. Heat made the air shimmer above the gray macadam, which added to Albert's feeling of seeing a mirage. He half raised his chubby arms and cheered. The gas station was now only minutes away.

Ned's weather-beaten gray shack, the old fashioned pumps, the phone booth—Albert found everything just as it was yesterday afternoon. Utterly quiet, utterly deserted.

Remind me never to move to the country. The pudgy boy told himself. It was as lively around here as a morgue.

He trudged on toward the pay phone. He was exhausted, but he was proud. He had made it!

Then a depressing thought occurred to him. After he made his phone call, he would have to walk *back* to camp. Well, maybe he could hitch a ride. Albert opened the door to the phone booth, the panes of glass folding inward with a screech.

Then he screamed.

He was wearing his swimming trunks. And *that* meant his loose change was back at the cabin! For an instant, Albert froze; then he slapped both pockets of his trunks.

Oh, the relief! The joy!—there was some change in these pockets as well. He fished out the coins, slipped them in the slot, dialed the number, and waited.

His mother answered in the middle of the first ring, as he knew she would. The thought of her sitting by the phone with her stomach in knots—was enough to tie knots in his stomach.

"Happy Mother's Day." he sang out with forced cheer. "One day early."

There was a static-filled pause.

"Mom?" he asked.

"Hello?" came her worried quavering voice. "Hello?"

"It's me, Mom! It's Albert! I'm fine, don't worry. Well, I'm not having the greatest time, but I'm fine. You were right, Mom. I shouldn't have come. But listen, I want to wish you a happy—"

"Hello?" she asked again. Her voice sounded twice as worried as before. "There's no one there." she said.

"Then hang up." Albert heard his father's equally worried voice say in the background.

"It must be a crank call." Mrs. Harris said, horror-stricken.

"I said hang up!" his father repeated.

Albert started shouting. "*Mom! It's me! There's something wrong with the connection. Can't you hear me? Mom? I called to wish you a happy—*"

There was a click as the line went dead.

Albert slammed the receiver back into its metal cradle with all his might. The gesture didn't release much of his frustration, though, so he picked up the receiver and slammed it down several more times.

A fiasco—the entire trip was turning into one big fiasco.

Albert had a little trouble squeezing back out of the booth, which made him even madder. He let out a groan, an almost primal cry of anger, as he popped out of the booth.

Then he spotted it.

Up the hill, Varner's house, the chimney just peeking out through the trees... and leaking from the chimney's mouth, beckoning to him like a crooked finger, a curl of gray smoke.

Varner was home.

You would think the guy would man his store once in a while, Albert thought grumpily. If Varner were down here where he belonged, then Albert could have used that old black desk phone inside the store. Now he would have to trek all the way up that hill.

Climb the hill? Albert's feet throbbed at the thought. But the idea of tramping all the way back to camp without having made his phone call—that was even worse. The whole point of hiking out here was to make sure his mother wasn't worrying. After his call, she was probably worrying twice as hard.

It turned out to be easy to find the trail behind Ned's shack. But it was hard to climb. By the time he came out of the woods at the top of the hill, Albert was breathing loudly through his wide-open mouth.

He was facing a large white framed house with a screened-in porch that wrapped around three sides. In the front of the porch there were two chairs, a swing, and a rocker. As he came a little closer, he could see a pile of knitting sitting in the base of the rocking chair. That jogged his memory. He vaguely remembered Varner saying something about his ma.

"Hello?" Albert called. He was suddenly very wary. Even with the smoke coming out the chimney, the house had an evil look about it. The dark windows were like empty sockets in a skull.

"Hello?"

The last thing Albert wanted to do was startle Varner. These country crazies probably spent the day guarding their property with huge shotguns.

With difficulty, Albert forced his thick legs to move, and he started across the lawn. There was something very wrong about this place, he was sure of it. But what?

Just my overactive imagination, he told himself.

"Hello?"

He put one sneaker on the first stone step up to the porch. What if the guy kept Doberman pinchers or something? And never fed them?

"It's Albert Harris, Mr. Varner. Hello? You know, from the group of kids that stopped by yesterday? I was just wondering if I could use your phone."

There was no response. The house seemed to stare back at him; it was as if the house itself were daring him to come just one step closer —

Albert knocked on the screen door to the porch. He could now see a doorbell, but it was located on the wooden door *inside* the porch. He hated to trespass any further. He wished—he prayed—that Mr. Varner would just hear his knock.

Albert waited. And waited. No one came. Finally he opened the screen door, the rusty hinges growled like a monster. He walked one step at a time across the creaking white-washed foor boards of the porch. There were white laced curtains hanging on the front door, making it hard to see in. The mother's touch, Albert was sure. Varner didn't look like the kind of guy who would put up curtains. Albert pressed the doorbell. Nothing happened—no sound, nothing.

Albert knocked again and tried to peer through the curtains at the room inside. Then, after telling himself he was being an incredible chicken and a scaredy-cat, he tried the doorknob.

The door was open. "Hello? Mr. Varner?"

The house looked clean and inviting. Nothing fancy, but very well cared for. In fact, there didn't seem to be a speck of dust anywhere. From where Albert was standing he could see the living room clearly. But he couldn't see a phone. He could also see the open archway to the kitchen. Probably the phone was in there.

"Mr. Varner?"

Albert was sweating all over, but this was a different kind of sweat than the one on the hike up here. This was a cold chammy sweat.

Maybe Varner had gone fishing or something. Then Albert could use the phone and get away before Varner came back.

And if he didn't make this call, he reminded himself, his mother would be sick with worry.

Leaving the front door open, Albert started for the kitchen. He passed a wide wooden stairway. There didn't seem to be anyone on the landing at the top of the stairs.

He approached the kitchen archway. With each step he could see more of the room inside. First he saw the old white stove with its cast-iron claw feet. Then the large refrigerator, a model he'd seen only in movies about the fifties. Then the knitted sampler on the wall: *A Clean House Is a Proud Home*.

And then, as he inched farther forward, he could see the wooden kitchen table.

He took another step.

Now he saw the first rickety wooden chair, which was empty.

The second chair. Empty.

Then he was in the kitchen, and he was facing the third and final chair.

And he was about to throw up.

Because sitting in that chair was—

Varner's sweet old mom.

Mrs. Varner's rotted and embalmed body was dressed up in a quaint old black dress and white apron. Her dead unseeing eyes were staring right at Albert.

Albert felt as if he were being given electric-shock therapy. His entire body shook. His tongue hung out. His eyes bulged. Gagging, he began to back toward the door.

When he heard—

Ned Varner, calling out from somewhere deep inside the house. "Well, you were right, Mother. You *did* save that Toll House cookie recipe. How about that? I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll cut it out of the paper for you and then you can paste it into your scrapbook."

Albert turned and bolted out of the kitchen, running faster than he had ever run in his life.

He didn't get far.

Blocking his path to the front door was Ned Varner. The man was wearing the same overalls as the day before, along with a dumb-

founded expression on his large doughy face. In one hand a large pair of kitchen shears, the blades wide open.

"Uh, I—I—I didn't see a thing!" Albert cried. "I—I mean.—I saw—but I don't care what I saw, what you do, it's your business—"

Ned Varner snapped the scissors shut. At the sound Albert snapped his jaw shut. He watched—riveted—as Varner set the paper down, ever so carefully, on the tiny wooden table next to the door. Then Varner ran his hand—the hand without the scissors—through his crewcut hair twice.

Then he raised the scissors and charged.

Screaming, Albert turned and ran. He ran the only way he could run. Back through the archway into the kitchen. He stared around the room in horror. The kitchen had no back door—he had reached a dead end.

Varner barreled through the archway, the scissors raised high over his head. Albert dodged around the table. But Varner roughly shoved the table aside.

That left Albert with only one source of protection. He grabbed the decaying body of Varner's mother. And as Varner brought the scissors down, Albert lifted the body up. The scissors slashed straight into the forehead of Varner's sweet old mom.

Varner screamed, a cry of pain that seemed to come from somewhere deep inside him. Albert screamed too, for different reasons.

Varner backed up in horror, staring at the scissors in his hand, in shock at what he had just done.

And then, without thinking, Albert raced forward, straight at Varner. Taken by surprise, Varner only had time to put up a hand to ward off the coming blow. Closing his eyes, Albert banged into the man with all his might. They both went over, and the scissors went flying.

There was no way Albert was going to stick around and try to get to those scissors before Varner. He scrambled to his feet and started running again.

He banged out the front door, the porch door, and flew down the steps. He didn't stop running, not once, all the way down the hill. He

rolled part of the way, though, because he tripped twice.

He didn't look back to see if Varner was coming after him. He didn't need to. He could hear Varner's shouts behind him.

Oh God oh God oh God—that was mostly what Albert was thinking as he ran. But then—

The phone booth! He suddenly remembered it as he came to the bottom of the hill. The phone hadn't worked when he tried to call his mother. But maybe it would work now when he called 911.

All his life, Albert had told himself that if he was ever in an emergency, he would just dial 911. Well, the emergency was finally here. But as he ran past Varner's shack and gas pumps, Albert realized that 911 couldn't help him now.

For one thing, it would mean slowing down, and that would mean letting Varner catch up. For another, the police station was probably miles and miles away.

No. If he called 911 it would be the last call he would ever make.

Albert hit the paved road, turned right and kept running.

His only hope, he told himself, was to get back to camp where his friends were waiting. After all, there was safety in numbers.

14

No Pain, No Gain

Still running hard, Paul Sexton flicked his sweaty wrist and glanced at his red digital Iron Man runner's sport watch. So far he'd been doing six-minute miles. He'd already finished four of them. Every muscle in his body screaming at him to stop.

But he wouldn't stop. Not Paul Sexton. His body could complain as much as it wanted. *He* was in charge.

It was that kind of strength of will that had made him what he was today. Why, every coach he'd ever played for had told him he had pro potential. The future stretched out before him like one long awards banquet. All-American, All-Pro, Hall of Fame...

Clipped to the waistband of his Everlast gym shorts was a small black pedometer that measured his distance. When the four on the pedometer finally started to roll up, replaced by the five, Paul started his final kick. He quickly built to flat-out sprint that raised clouds of dust from the dirt road. He groaned as he ran. And still he ran faster, faster.

In his mind, he imagined he was beating Carly in a race for the gold medal. Leaving her in the dust. Take that, Carly!

He'd never been turned down by a girl before. Never.

He ran harder.

What a time prima donna she was. He had wasted a whole night on her, a night he could have spent with that little French pastry puff, Monique. Well, he'd make up for tonight. Big time.

Paul's groan became a scream as he raised his arms in triumph and crossed an imaginary finish line, accepting the thunderous applause of an imaginary crowd.

He jogged to a halt, almost collapsing to the ground. He tried to force himself to keep walking, but every breath was as painful as if he were being stabbed.

Wow, he had finally really pushed himself this time. He smiled proudly—though it came out more like a grimace. He had that rubber legged feeling that told him he had really had an excellent workout.

There wasn't an ounce of strength left in his body. It was as if he had wrung himself totally dry.

He found the beginning of the trail back to camp and turned off the road, staggering slightly. It was dense brush, and the damp leaves and vines kept grabbing at him, slapping him, scratching him like angry fans who all wanted a piece of him.

He staggered on. There was this scary and malevolent buzz in the air. Just bugs, he told himself.

He had only gone a few yards, winding his way through the thick woods, when he heard the footsteps crunching through the brush behind him.

He stopped, leaning up against a tree, still panting like crazy. "Who's... there?" he managed to call "Boone?"

No response.

The footsteps kept coming toward him.

Paul couldn't move. Now that he had stopped walking, resting felt too delicious. With every passing second, his body seemed to grow more tired. "Helllooo." he sang out, but not loudly as he would have liked. His lungs felt as if they had collapsed.

And then, the figure pushed through the thick green bushes and came into view. He was a tall man wearing camouflage clothes and heavy black boots. Covering the man's face was a beat-up hockey mask. Only the man's dark, dead eyes shone through. The man was carrying a cardboard box. He was also pointing a double-barreled shotgun right at Paul.

Despite his utter exhaustion, Paul got an instant second wind. With a strangled cry, he pushed off the tree and started to run.

The pain in Paul's side, the cramps in his hamstrings, the needle-like ache in his shins, the searing agony in his lungs all started back up at once, twice as bad as they'd been when he was working out. He fell. He got to his feet and started running again. Fell again.

Behind him, the man in the mask didn't even bother to run. He never hurried or slowed his pace. He just kept coming.

When Paul fell the third time, he knew in his bones that it was no use. For the first time in his life, it looked as if Paul Sexton might lose a race.

***

Oh God oh God oh God—the words kept bubbling up in Albert's brain like one of Kyle's mantras.

He was still running. He hadn't stopped once since he left the gas station. Well, he'd jogged part of the way, but every time he slowed down, he heard Varner in the distance, making his way after Albert through the woods. The sound always inspired him to push himself harder.

Albert had left the dirt road, thinking he might lose himself in the woods. Mistake number nine million and one, he now told himself. These country folk probably knew every trail, every rock, every stick of these woods. Albert was no longer sure which direction he was headed in. He'd probably end up back at Varner's house!

He couldn't think like that. He yelled at himself to run faster, faster! All those years of coaches screaming at him. Move that tub of lard, Harris! Shake that blubber, Harris! He had never met a Phys-Ed teacher he didn't hate. Now he had found the ultimate Phys-ed nightmare. A coach with a pair of kitchen shears about six inches long. A coach who wanted to punish him for being out of shape—with death.

He ran on, coming to a tiny clearing in the woods.

Oh God Oh God—his mother was right. She told him not to come up here. She told him, she told him, she told him. Well, you wouldn't listen, would you, Albert? No you wouldn't. And now you're going to have to die for—

Albert's left sneaker caught a hole, his ankle turning and wrenching. The boy tripped and went flying, his head banging up against a tree stump with a sickening thump.

He saw stars. He wasn't sure if he had blacked out. But then he remembered where he was. And what would happen to him if he stayed there. He shook his head and struggled desperately back to his feet, like a boxer trying to beat the referee's ten count.

As he stood, he caught a glimpse of what had tripped him. A few feet away, a white stone marker stuck up out of the ground. In front

of the stone a hole had been dug. He didn't have time to think about what any of it meant. Through the trees, he could see the blue of Varner's overalls as the man made his way into the clearing.

Albert started to limp away. His ankle felt broken. He couldn't run anymore. It was useless. Blubbering now, sure he was about to die, Albert bent down to scoop up some rocks.

He waited until Varner was about twenty yards away. Then he launched the first rock at him with all his might.

It didn't hit Varner. It thwrocked off a pine tree about five yards to his right. But Varner looked surprised. And he stopped plodding toward Albert; he stood there, apparently considering the situation.

"I told you!" Albert screamed. *"I told you I didn't care what you"*—he threw another rock, missed—*"what you do in your house. Please! Just leave me alone! I promise I won't say a word!"*

As he threw more stones, all of which sailed wide of the mark, Varner's jaw slowly dropped. It was as if he couldn't believe that Albert would fight back.

And then, only then did it occur to Albert that Varner wasn't looking at him. He was looking *past* him.

And meant that whatever was making Varner's jaw drop was coming up behind Albert.

Albert turned slowly, suspecting some kind of trick.

He found himself looking up into the face of a man wearing a white hockey mask.

At that same instant—

The man in the mask seemed to punch Albert right in the stomach. That's what it felt like. A thud. Like the time in the second grade when a bully on the playground had punched Albert in exactly the same spot.

Except now the man in the mask pulled back his hand. And Albert saw what the man was holding. A long metal hunting knife, dark and wet with blood. Albert's blood.

And then the man in the mask punched him again.

15

Fun in the Sun

The man in the mask wiped off his bloody hands on his green camouflage pants.

"Good work." the voice told him. "But there's more work to be done."

He nodded. He glanced around the clearing, then carefully lifted the gray cardboard box and set it in the hollow of a nearby tree for safekeeping. He'd come back for it later. In the meantime, he needed to have his hands free.

***

"Isn't this *excellent?* " Boone asked as he paddled the canoe.

Monique answered with a pout, showing off her dimples. She'd been driving him wild with that little pout and those dimples of hers all weekend.

"Don't tell me you're going to start complaining again, Monique. After all, I'm the one doing the paddling. You're getting a free ride."

"I'm bored." Monique complained, crossing her thin arms around her ample chest. "We do this for hours now. Look. It is start to get dark."

"Yes, said Boone, imitating her accent. "It is start to get dark."

"That not funny."

"Sorry."

Boone kept paddling. All around the lake there was this intense and beautiful silence. For a moment, Boone wondered what the others were up to. He'd heard shouts and screams in the woods about half an hour back, but nothing since. The truth was he didn't really care what they were up to, or how they were all amusing themselves. Because he knew how *he* was going to be amusing himself any minute now. He smiled at Monique.

"I'm bored." she repeated.

She's bored, Boone told himself with a sigh. Well, he knew just the thing to shake things up. He dropped the paddle into the bottom of the old canoe and started to rock the boat back and forth with both hands.

"Stop it!" Monique shrieked. Boone stopped, but he couldn't stop smiling. Monique was such a spoiled brat, it was easy to tease her.

"I'm tired of this lake and I'm tired of this whole trip." Monique said. "I need a bath and a Jacuzzi and a manicure and a shampoo and a massage."

Crouching carefully to keep his balance, Boone started moving slowly down to her end of the canoe. "Massage?" he said. In a Groucho Marx voice, he added, "You said the secret woid."

He kept moving toward her until he was kneeling in the canoe right in front of where she was sitting. And then he leaned forward until his face was only an inch from hers. Her stunned face still wore that same bored expression. Then he rocked the boat again—hard. Her arms flew around Boone's neck, to steady herself.

And then he was kissing her and man, it felt good. Her lips were even fuller and softer than he had imagined. At least they felt soft until the rocking boat caused their mouths to bang together. He felt his tooth cut sharply into his lip.

He pulled his head back and laughed. "Wow." he said. "You like it rough, eh?" He licked the cut inside his lip and tasted the dark metallic liquid of his own blood. "What are you? A vampire?"

Monique giggled, still keeping her arms around his neck.

"Serves you right. You are such a pushy."

Boone guffawed. "I am such a pushy?"

"You know what I mean."

"Right. Like you don't want it."

Monique batted her long dark lashes. "I didn't say that."

"Good." Boone kissed her again, and this time the boat cooperated, and the kiss was long and deep.

"Why don't we lie down on the bottom of the boat?" Boone asked huskily.

Monique looked down at the canoe. Old wood, mossy and wet with puddles. "It's filthy." she said, and sniffed.

"So?" Boone leered. "So am I."

Monique continued to frown. "I don't like to get my swimsuit all messy."

"Good thinking." Boone said. "We'll take off all your clothes."

"Stop it."

"Oh, c'mon." Boone tried to pull her gently forward. "It'll feel great. C'mon." He didn't want to whine or beg, but she was driving him wild. "It'll be fantastic. We'll just be drifting along with the current while we do it."

Monique arched one thin eyebrow. "Do what?"

"Take a guess."

"Oh, I not do that."

"Right." Boone said, with that lazy smile.

"I not."

"We'll see."

"That's right. You'll see."

"We're wasting time." Boone said, irritation starting to make its way into his voice.

"Who's in such a hurry?"

"I am." Boone admitted with an easy laugh. "My whole body is beginning to ache."

"I like you, Boone." Monique said in an offhanded way. "But I not care if you are Tommy Cruise, I not getting down in that muck and dirt." She waggled a finger at him "You have to take me to a resort if you want to win me over."

A resort, Boone thought with annoyance. Like he could ever afford that. "Monique," he said, "this is as fancy as I get."

Suddenly he stood. He grabbed Monique around the middle and pulled her up as well. The boat was rocking wildly now as he tried to pull her down with him, down into the bottom of the boat.

Boone knew that lots of times girls liked it if you just went for it in one fell swoop like that. That way, they could tell themselves the whole thing wasn't their idea. But Monique was struggling and Boone's attempt at seduction was quickly turning into a wrestling match. And the canoe was about to capsize.

"I said no!" Monique yelled.

"Monique—the boat!"

It was too late. Now Boone was holding on to Monique not out of passion but only to steady himself.

And the next moment the canoe had tipped violently, and Boone was flying out.

Monique squatted down, holding on to the boat's wooden sides. She was laughing happily. Boone made a huge splash. The water sprayed her, but she just laughed harder. For the first time in hours she didn't feel bored. The boat settled down. She waited for Boone to resurface.

He didn't.

"Boone?" She was starting to get a little worried, but she knew Boone well enough by now. She knew he was playing a trick on her. He was such a little boy. He was the oldest one here, but that was only in years. In maturity, Boone seemed to be about six.

"Boone?"

Even though she knew he was playing a trick, the trick was really starting to work. How long could he hold his breath underwater, anyway? Oh she hated this kind of teasing. Hate it, hate it, hate it! She leaned as far out of the canoe as she could, studying the dark surface of Crystal Lake.

"*Boone!* " she screamed.

And then, all at once, he was lunging up out of the water at her. He grabbed her around the neck, trying to pull her out of the boat.

She tried to pry off Boone's fingers. But now his other hand clamped down on her long wavy hair and he yanked her head down. Was he insane? Why was he being so rough?

Her head banged down hard against the wooden ridge of the canoe. And again. And in the violence and confusion Monique saw for the first time that it wasn't Boone at all. It was someone much larger with a white hockey mask covering his face. And now the man's arm was raised above her. And now it was coming down—again and again.

A moment later—

Boone lunged back into the other side of the boat, yelling, "Surprise! "

He was expecting Monique to scream. He was expecting the canoe to tip over from his weight. Neither of those things happened. The boat tipped wildly, to be sure, but he was able to make it into the canoe's bottom, and then the boat righted itself.

The pretty French girl was slumped down at the other end of the canoe, the paddle at her feet. "Monique?"

She didn't answer. Giving him a little of his own medicine, he realized. He liked that—a girl who likes to tease.

He started his crouch-walk toward the other end of the canoe. "Monique?"

It was then that he saw the blood trickling into the water at the bottom of the canoe. The dark redness was spreading toward him fast, as if it were out to get him.

"Monique!" He moved forward as quick as he could. Boone was almost upon her when he froze. Monique's clothes were slashed and drenched with blood.

Boone had no idea who had done this. But in one split second he instinctively realized that he was next.

He picked up the paddle from the bottom of the canoe and stood up straight. He was just in time. Because at that moment the hunter attacked again.

Boone swung the paddle with all his might.

On a playing field, it was the kind of swing that would have produced either a home run or a strikeout. This time the paddle caught the hunter just under the mask—right in the throat.

16

Dusk

It was getting too dark to read. Carly marked her place in her romance novel with the tasseled leather bookmark her mom had bought for her along with the book. *From the library of Carly McDonnell the Magnificent,* read the bookmark's gold print.

Mom was pretty corny, but Carly didn't mind. It was strange. Now that she had put over a hundred miles distance between them, she was feeling a lot closer to her mother. Sure, Mom was overprotective. But that was just because she loved Carly so much. Anyway it was up to Carly to stand up for herself.

Carly walked outside, letting the screen door bang shut behind her. The cabins all looked empty. Where was everybody, anyway? She wouldn't put it past the other kids to go off and do something—in town, say—without bothering to come look for her. Oh, well. It was her fault for going off and reading.

She started down the trail to the lake. Boone's rock music was no longer blaring. There was just this statically sound broadcasting from the tree speakers. Apparently the tape had run out long ago.

Carly felt sure she'd find someone hanging out down there. There was always a place where any group congregated. In houses it was usually the kitchen. On this trip it was the dock.

Sure enough, when she came out of the trail she saw Kyle and Suzanne, still sitting back to back at the edge of the pier. Those two were truly unbelievable. How long could they meditate?

Dusk had fallen fast, the huge orange sun setting into the dark waters of Crystal Lake. Carly had to walk all the way to the end of the pier before she saw that both teenagers' throats were cut.

It was as if a knife had been drawn across her own throat. Except that what came out of her was not blood, but sound—a piercing scream that felt as if it were ripping out her vocal cords.

She stopped screaming for a second, both hands going to her face. Then she screamed all over again. "*Noooooooo!!*"

She put her hand on Suzanne's bloody shoulder, shaking her, as if she could wake her from death. The tall girl fell sideways onto the hard dock, her head thumping against the wood with a sickening thud, like a pumpkin dropped from a high window.

Carly started screaming all over again. Because when Suzanne moved, the perfect balance achieved by the two corpses was ruined. Kyle's dead body fell across Carly's white Reeboks, his open eyes staring up at her lifelessly. Under his head the tie-dyed sheet was now dyed with blood.

Carly moved back so quickly she almost fell off the edge of the dock. Then, stepping widely around the dead bodies, she started running back to camp, her sneakers slapping hollowly against the wooden dock. She stopped before the entrance to the now-dark trail. "*Help!* " she screamed at the top of her lungs. "*Boone, Boone!*"

She screamed for several minutes, shouting for Boone, for Paul, for anyone. There was no response from the lake. Not so much as an echo.

Even if no one from the group could hear her, she prayed that there was someone who was living by the lake, someone who could come and help.

And then Boone's words came back to her.

No one comes here. Ever.

Which meant she was alone in the dark in the woods—with a crazed killer—and no one to help her or save her but herself.

She started to run and didn't stop once all the way back to—

The cars. The cars! That was her only thought now, her only hope. She would drive somewhere and get help.

Driving had always scared her. But right now being safe inside a locked car seemed like the most wonderful idea ever.

She tried the Volkswagen van first. The doors were locked. She pulled on the handle with all her might, as if there were a way she could open the door by sheer strength of will. How could they have locked the van?! Kyle and Suzanne were both so laid back, they never remembered to lock anything. They always left—

Carly stopped short. Hanging from the ignition was Kyle's lucky rabbit's foot. He had locked his keys inside the car.

Carly slapped the window with both hands. Then she was running again, through the tall grass, to the red convertible. Paul had put the top up but had left his car opened, bless him.

But there was no keys.

Carly considered locking herself inside the car and waiting for the rest of the group to return. No. The thought of being locked inside that car and waiting scared her too much. She had to feel like she was doing *something* to save herself—even if there was nothing to be done.

There stood Boone's huge motorcycle, parked near a tree. She didn't even bother to check it for the keys. There was no way she could ride that thing, she was sure. Getting on the Kawasaki would be as good as committing suicide.

She raced past her own cabin and started down the trail back into the woods. Paul had tried to lure her into his cabin this morning before their jog. Which one was it? Cabin Twenty-one? Twenty-two?

She knew it when she saw it. She flung open the screen door.

She found Paul's pants on the floor and grabbed them, slapping the pockets furiously. No keys She turned, eyeing the messy cabin desperately. Where did he put them? He wouldn't take his keys with him while he jogged, would he? She dumped out Paul's suitcase, though that seemed like the wrong place to look. Then she spotted the rugby shirt he'd been wearing yesterday, hanging on a nail by the door.

She ripped the shirt from the wall and tried the front pocket. Sunglasses, gum—*keys*.

She was running again, the door banging shut behind her. Outside it was getting darker and darker. The only light now was the cold light of the moon. For the first time she realized that her face was wet with tears; she had no memory of having cried.

When she got back to Paul's car, her hands were trembling so badly she couldn't fit the keys in the ignition. "C'mon, c'mon, *c'mon*!" she urged herself.

Finally, the key slipped into the slot. She suddenly though to lock the door beside her, making sure the passenger side was locked as well.

She got the car started, the headlights on. Then she looked down at the stick shift and felt like she was about to throw up. She barely knew how to drive a car with automatic transmission. How would she ever get away now?

She would have to try. Try to remember. She had seen plenty of people driving stick. There was a clutch or some such thing. She lowered her head and peered at the floor. Then suddenly she stopped as if paralyzed, the tiny hairs on the back of her neck standing up straight.

When she'd gotten in the car, she hadn't looked in the backseat. Every instinct in her body now told her she was about to be attacked.

She whirled.

The backseat was empty.

Smash!

The windshield splintered. The glass stayed in place, cracked into a spider's web. In that confusing instant, it was hard for her to see out through the now-white *a*nd broken glass. But she could dimly make out her attacker. A tall wiry man with a white hockey mask and a shotgun. He was using the butt as a club.

He struck the windshield again, and this time the gun came through the glass, stopping only inches from Carly's chin.

Carly dove to her right, grabbing wildly for the door handle. The door wouldn't budge. Then she remembered. She had just locked it. She started yanking at the tiny plastic button. It came up. Then she jammed her shoulder against the door.

She only got part way out the door.

At that same moment, the killer's arm lunged through the windshield. Four greasy fingers clamped down on the collar of Carly's shirt. She struggled to escape, but the killer's strong hand held her back.

And now he was pulling her out of the car toward him. She came scraping and crashing right out through what was left of the windshield. He whacked her head hard against the hood of the car. The killer's dark eyes stared down at her through the mask. Then he took a step back.

She felt cold steel as the killer placed the barrel of the shotgun right up against her forehead.

And then he pulled the trigger.

17

Having a Blast

The shotgun blast was deafening. It took Carly a moment to realize she was still alive. She was sprawled across the hood, shards of glass sparkling in her hair like jewels.

In front of the car, illuminated by the ghostly glow of the headlights, the horrific fight continued. It was Boone who had saved her. He must have knocked into the man just as the gun went off, ruining his shot. Now he was riding the killer like a cowboy on a wild bronco. He seemed to be whipping the man, raising and lowering his right arm down into the killer's back again and again.

Then Carly saw the knife in Boone's hand, Boone's hunting knife, the one he had used to scare her last night! Blood geysered from the killer in all directions, gushing and spurting. The killer dropped his shotgun and began wildly slapping his hands back at Boone, trying to get him off his back. But Boone kept stabbing. And slowly, slowly, the killer's movements began to slow. Then he sunk to one knee. With Boone still on his back, he fell face forward in the dirt.

Boone continued to stab him. Finally he realized the man was dead. He stood slowly. Carly slid off the car and came toward him. She was bleeding. But she couldn't feel a thing. Her body and her mind were numb.

"Monique"—he panted hard, breathing through a wide open mouth—"is—dead."

"So are Kyle and Suzanne." she said, flatly.

"I know." Boone said. "I saw them on the way here."

He turned and looked at the killer's fallen body. "I thought he drowned... I thought he was dead. I..." No more words came. He stared at her helplessly.

Carly stared back at him for a moment. And then the tears began, wracking sobs that shook her body hard.

Boone wrapped his arms around her, holding her to his chest. "Oh, God," he groaned, "this is all my fault. I never should have brought you guys out here." She was crying too hard to respond. "But I swear

to you, Carly, I never thought any of those old stories about this place were true! I never—"

Carly pulled back in a sudden spasm of terror. She pushed him away—hard. "Where's Paul? Albert?"

"I don't know." he said. He was crying, too.

She stepped toward the fallen man. "Make sure he's dead." she ordered Boone.

"Carly." Boone said gently. "He's dead, believe me. I must have stabbed him six hundred times."

"Stab him again!"

Boone didn't move. Carly looked at the gun, which lay only inches away from the outstretched hand of the killer. On that hand were four greasy fingers. All that was left of the third finger was a tiny stump. She kicked the gun out of the dead man's reach.

"Carly, it's over." Boone said. "Here, look." He rolled the tall corpse over. Then he stuck the toe of his shoe under the edge of the white mask, about to pry it off with his foot.

"Don't." Carly said, grabbing his arm. "I don't want to see his face." She pushed him away. "C'mon, Boone! What are we doing? We've got to go get help! *Now*, Boone! Paul and Albert might be wounded!"

"You're right." Boone said, but in a way that suggested he didn't feel much hope for Paul and Albert.

Unseen by either Carly or Boone, the four fingers on the hunter's right hand began to twitch.

Boone took Carly's arm, leading her toward his motorcycle. He climbed on, jammed the key in the ignition and hit the electronic starter button. The large Kawasaki roared to life like some snarling beast.

Carly could feel the hot breath of the exhaust against her bare and bloody legs. Boone didn't have his helmet, there was no time for that now. Putting her arms on Boone's back for support, she swung one leg over the bike. Then she clutched Boone's stomach in a bear hug so tight she doubted if he could breathe. He didn't complain.

He swung the bike in a wide arc, doing a U-turn of sorts in front of the circle of cabins. Then he aimed the bike toward the road.

He was driving past the shattered red convertible when the second shotgun blast exploded through the still night air.

18

An Open Grave

"*Boone!* " Carly screamed.

There was no use. There was no way he could hear. She was still holding Boone's body on the bike. But the shotgun blast had blown away Boone's head.

For a moment, the motorcycle continued to hurtle forward. She grabbed frantically for the handlebars, her hands on Boone's, trying to steer. But the bike was slowing down fast. It fell onto its side with Carly and Boone trapped underneath. As she wriggled free, she felt her skin scrape across the searing hot metal near the exhaust pipes. Her leg felt like it was on fire. She got back on her feet and started running.

She looked back. She couldn't see the killer. She was so frightened she could barely think. Her only prayer was that he had had strength left for only one last shot. That now he was dead at last.

Another blast ripped through the darkness. Carly kept running, afraid to look and see what part of her body had just been blown away.

As best as she could tell, the shot had missed her. Because she was still running.

She was running through woods so dark she could barely see where she was going. Somehow she managed to avoid running into any trees. Then she ran smack into Paul Sexton.

His athletic body had been nailed to a tree with a huge knife.

She was beyond screaming, beyond crying. Gritting her teeth, she worked the handle of the large knife until the blade came free from the tree bark and free of Paul's guts. Paul fell at her feet, lying there with his head down as if he were asking her forgiveness.

She backed away, then turned and started running.

At least now she was armed.

She had no idea where she was going. When she finally hit a dirt road, she turned left. She figured she'd stay on the road. At least here

there was a chance—however slight—that she might be able to flag down a passing car.

She didn't see any cars. Not one. But after twenty minutes of running, she saw an old gray two-story house. The house was set back from the road across a large field. Maybe there was someone home—or at least a phone she could use. She started over the field.

Out in the open field, the moonlight had a better chance of reaching Earth, and Carly could at least see where she was going. Up ahead, there was this huge mound of black dirt. There was also a horrible smell in the air, something acrid that burned the inside of her nose.

As she ran on, a thick yellow mist wrapped itself around her ankles. Up head, there were headstones sticking up out of the dark earth. Some kind of family graveyard.

She reached the first grave.

It lay opened at her feet, the rotting skeleton inside swarming with worms and flies.

She found herself screaming again.

All around her, the dark ground was spotted with open graves. Still screaming, she turned back toward the road.

She didn't get far. She had only taken a few steps when the killer came scrambling out of the woods. He was carrying the shotgun at his side. He stopped when he saw her. But only for a moment. Then he started across the field.

19

Lending a Hand

She turned and plunged across the field, running twice as fast as before. The open graves seemed everywhere now. She stepped in one grave, felt the bones breaking under her feet.

Some of the bodies were more decomposed than others. The second grave she stepped in, she felt something squish.

The third grave she managed to avoid.

But as she ran by, a bony hand shot up out of the ground and grabbed her ankle.

She was screaming now—or maybe she wasn't screaming, she no longer knew. She pulled on her ankle as hard as she could, but the hand was powerful and held her firm.

At the same time, across the field, she could see the killer coming steadily closer.

He was staggering pretty badly, and even from this distance, she could see how bloody he was. But he was still coming. How much energy would it take for him to blow her brains out?

She yanked her foot with all her might and finally managed to pull it free. There was a snapping sound. For the first time Carly realized what had really happened. She had caught her foot on a root. There was no skeleton, no hand. She was losing her mind.

She ran without looking back.

Which was why she didn't see the skeleton's hand slithering back into the ground.

Carly ran a zigzagging course across the field, giving the remaining graves a wide berth. As she approached the large mound of black earth, the burning smell grew stronger. There was strange sounds in the air, as if distant screams. And the ground was writhing and alive with gross white worms.

Was she in Hell? Yelling in disgust and horror and fear, she ran on, her sneakers squishing right over the bugs. When she reached the house, she pounded on the door with the handle of the knife.

But it was no use, and she knew it. She'd been screaming her head off in the field. If there was anyone home, wouldn't they have heard her by now?

She rattled the knob. Locked. And the killer was halfway across the field.

She kept running. She had to stay out of his shooting range. She came to another dirt road. Ran straight across it. Her only hope, she decided, was in the thick dark cover of the woods.

She ran through the brush as fast as she could; it was slow going. The trees seemed to loom up at her out of nowhere, as if trying to brain her.

Whenever she stopped and listened, she heard nothing. No approaching footsteps. The silence felt scarier than sound. She knew the ground was wet, and she was breathing hard; how could she possibly hear him? All the same, she was sure he was there—somewhere—out there—still coming.

She kept running. Only to reach a dead end. The dark waters of Crystal Lake.

She was about to wade out into the lake and start swimming when she remembered.

She couldn't swim. Not even when a psychotic killer was stalking her. She'd drown for sure.

She wanted to drop to the ground and weep. But somehow she didn't think that the man in the mask would comfort her when he caught up with her.

Now what? She couldn't go back the way she had come.

Or could she?

She looked at the deep clear tracks she had made through the wet mud that led to the water's edge.

Everyone knows how to swim. Paul had said.

And all at once, she had a plan.

She started out into the water, wading to her left. When she had gone about thirty yards she cut back into the woods, found a good climbing tree, and climbed. She kept climbing until she had reached the thickest part of the leaf cover.

Then she hid herself and waited. *She* knew she couldn't swim. The killer didn't.

Almost immediately, she started cursing herself for not going farther while she was in the water. From where she was now hiding she could see her old trail. And that meant he would be able to see her.

It took only moments for the killer to emerge from the dark woods. He followed her tracks right to the water's edge. Then he looked out into the water, thinking.

Swim! Carly begged him silently.

The killer didn't swim. His masked head turned as he looked back down to her tracks.

Carly's heart, which had been pounding hard, now doubled its efforts.

And then the killer lifted his masked head and stared up at the trees.

He turned his head first this way, then that.

Then he stopped turning.

He was staring straight at Carly.

20

A Reunion in the Woods

The killer looked away again. Oh, God. He hadn't really seen her! Carly's heart, which seemed to have stopped beating altogether, now resumed operations. Yes! Yes! The man in the mask was backtracking, going back into the forest, going back the way he had come.

Carly waited several minutes. Then she started climbing down the tree. She paid little attention when the rough bark tore into the bare skin of her arm and legs.

For the first time since this nightmare had begun, she was able to think again. Her thought were not pleasant.

There was no getting around it. The man in the mask had survived more stab wounds than was humanly possible.

Boone's words came back to her once more.

Jason keeps coming back from the dead.

Well, monster or human, it made no difference to Carly. Whatever *it* was, it was trying to kill her. Whatever it was, it would be back.

Huddled at the base of the tree, Carly looked down at her hands. They were empty. The knife?

She had slipped it into her pocket when she climbed the tree. After a moment of terrified groping in the dark, she found the weapon at the base of the trunk, where it must have fallen.

She stood in the dark, her shoulders heaving as she panted in fear. The thought of waiting here was too much to bear. If she stayed, time was on the killer's side. He would find her eventually. Her only hope was get out of the woods.

She wasn't running now. She was walking slowly, one step at a time. That way, she figured, the wet ground cover would help her move quietly through the woods.

For over an hour, she hiked. Her ears strained for any warning sounds. It was exhausting, operating at such a fevered pitch of tension. The sharp pine smell of the woods mingled with the murky smell of sweat that drenched her body. Her hands, arms, and face

were covered with sap and grime; her leg was blistered and running with pus where it had touched the motorcycle's exhaust. She kept going.

And then she came to a small clearing. There was a white stone sticking out of the ground like a marker. There was a hole in front of the hole. And by the stone was a large dark shape. The shape of a body, lying in the leaves.

She moved closer, terror gripping her as surely as that tree root had grabbed her foot in the cemetery.

She didn't have to look at the corpse's face. She knew who it was. It was Albert.

Carly had been through so much—survived so much—already. But seeing Albert's body lying here like this, it took the last little bit of hope away from her.

Poor old Albert was dead, left here in the woods like so much garbage.

It was mind-blowing—a million volts to the brain. She couldn't comprehend it. Her friends were all dead, all these young people just starting out in the world. Their whole lives had stretched out ahead of them. They had done nothing wrong, nothing to deserve this brutal horror.

She didn't have time to cry. Because right then she realized that there was another horrible thing about finding Albert's body.

It meant that after all this walking, she had gone nowhere. She had just been circling around and around, like a target going back and forth in a shooting gallery.

Right then she knew. Knew she would never make it through this night or out of these woods alive.

She staggered on for several yards before she saw the next body. This time she didn't recognize the face right away. Then she realized where she had seen this man before. It was Ned Varner, that strange man at the gas station. Dead like the rest.

Carly felt like she was going to faint. Then she felt like she might throw up. Her mother had always coached her on various safety precautions. Carly had never needed any of them before in her life. Now one of the tips actually came in handy. She bent over hanging

her head way down so the blood would rush back to her brain. And after a moment, the nausea and faintness began to pass.

She straightened slowly. She still felt weak, and she put her hand out against a tree to steady herself.

Her hand felt something wet and soft.

She jerked her hand away in terror.

But it was just a box, a gray cardboard box nestled in the hollow of the tree.

She removed the box, which was surprisingly heavy, and set it on the ground. Then she lifted the lid.

She started to scream.

So did the severed head inside the box.

21

The Final Kill

Carly dropped the box. Inside the box the head kept screaming. The voice was incredibly loud, high pitched and harsh, like grinding gears. The box was jiggling from side to side as the head moved inside it.

"*She's here! She's here! She's here* "

From where she was standing, Carly could barely see into the box, could only see the tight curls of iron-gray hair on top of the woman's head. She had already gotten a close up look at the rotted old flesh, the dark eyes burning with anger. Somehow, though, seeing that little bit of hair was even worse.

Carly backed up a few steps. But it was as if her entire body were a funny bone that had been whacked with a rubber hammer. She felt totally and unpleasantly light; she couldn't move.

Now she heard the sound of someone thrashing loudly back toward the clearing. She backed away from the sound.

"*She's here, you fool!*" the head shouted. The box shook as the head struggled to scream even louder. "*Kill her!* Kill her!*"*

The murderer emerged from the darkness, shotgun in hand. His white mask caught and reflected the thin beams of moonlight that filtered down through the trees.

Carly took another step back, hit a rock, and stumbled. She would have fallen but she smacked up against a tree trunk. She stood there, shaking.

"*Kill her! Kill her!*"

The man in the mask was staring straight at her. Now he was starting toward her. As he passed the cardboard box, the head shrieked, "*Pick me up! Pick me up!*"

Dutifully, the bloody killer bent down over the cardboard box and lifted the old woman's head by the iron gray hair. The head's angry eyes fixated hypnotically on Carly's. Now the killer came forward, carrying the severed head like a lamp.

Carly pressed back against the tree. The head of the old woman eyed her. It's rotten mouth twisted into a sneer. "Look at her, the filthy little slut is too scared to run."

The killer held the head toward Carly. Carly cringed. The head writhed as it spat at Carly with all its might.

Carly made no move to wipe her face. She couldn't. Her hands were frozen at her sides. She couldn't speak either. Her mouth was bone dry.

"That's what you get," said the head, "for what you did to my son. All you dirty minded rotten little *tramps!*"

The eyes of Jason Voorhees' mother glared at her a moment longer, then glanced up at the hunter.

"Kill her." the head ordered.

It was only then that Carly realized what she was feeling. One of her hands, as it pressed so tightly against her side, was getting pricked by the point of the knife.

The killer set the head down carefully on a rock. At that moment, Carly charged.

Holding the knife with both hands, she plunged it into the killer's back, all the way up to the hilt. The killer grunted, dropped on all fours from the force of the blow. Carly pulled the long blade out, raised it, and plunged it down again.

The man's green camouflage clothes were already stained red with blood. Fresh blood now began to ooze out from the dark encrusted wounds. She kept stabbing and stabbing while the killer and the severed head screamed.

Suddenly, the tall man rolled over, taking Carly with him. He was on top of her now. She jabbed up at him with the knife, slicing into his arms. His blood spurt in her face.

Then he grabbed a large rock and lifted it over her head.

He brought it smashing down.

She wrenched her head to the side just in time. She felt the rock cut her ear as it came down.

He lifted the rock again. But now she hacked at his arm with all her might, holding the knife with both hands. This time the knife cut straight through to the bone.

The man screamed in agony and dropped the rock. She twisted her head, but this time her luck had run out. The rock caught her left temple with a thud that echoed through her skull.

The blow stunned her for a second. She dropped the knife. And now the killer closed four greasy fingers around Carly's slim neck. He pressed down hard, choking her.

Carly gagged. Desperate for air, she squirmed violently, trying to break his grip. Her hands and legs flailed helplessly. In the background, she could hear the severed head shrieking, crying for her blood. She could no longer see, only feel, as her hands found the mask on the killer's face. Her fingers ripped at the mask pulling it up.

And now the head was shrieking even more violently. "*No! No! The mask! The power!*"

She only vaguely heard the words and then—

The mask came off in her hands and—

Suddenly—she could breath again.

She was staring up into the killer's face. His dark beard covered most of his features, a mask of its own. But she could see his dark hateful eyes. Only now those eyes looked surprised—and afraid.

The four fingers were still around her throat, but they had loosened.

The killer began to cough. He spat up whole mouthfuls of blood. When Carly pushed him, he fell backward like a rag doll.

She wriggled out from underneath his dead weight. He stared up at her glassy-eyed. Then he lay his head slowly down on the ground.

She didn't need to check. She knew he was gone at last.

The eyes of the woman's head gleamed in the darkness, watching Carly shrewdly. The teenager made a wide circle around her, keeping her eyes on the head's eyes. She slowly bent and picked up the killer's shotgun. The head snared, it's eyes flashing with fury. Carly moved closer, placing the butt of the huge rifle against her shoulder. She aimed the gun. And fired.

The muzzle of the gun was only inches from it's target. There was nothing left of the head after the blast. Carly herself was knocked to the ground by the gun's recoil. Her shoulder felt broken where the butt of the gun had rested.

Still it was over now.

Well, not quite. There was one thing left to be done. *The mask*, the head had shouted. *The mask, the power*.

Carly picked up the white hockey mask. Without looking back at any of the bodies strewn throughout the clearing, she started through the woods.

She hiked all the way back to the campgrounds. The whole time she was walking, it was as if her brain were dead. There were no thoughts going through it. Only the one—the thing she had to do—her plan.

It was probably good that she kept moving. As soon as she rested, the shock would hit. Absorbing the horror that had occurred here tonight, it might be harder on her than experiencing it in the first place.

She found Boone's canoe near the dock. He had pulled it up across the mud by the lake's edge. One end of the canoe was strained with Monique's blood. Monique's body lay nearby, her arms folded across her chest like a mummy.

Carly searched the water's edge for a large rock. She pulled one from the mud. There was a sucking noise as the ground finally released the stone, which was almost too large for her to carry. She had to bend over double as she walked back to the canoe.

A crazy thought came to her. Lifting heavy objects. Her mother always yelled at her for that, saying she'd hurt her back. Well, all those worries of her mother's, all those rules—they were broken once and for all. Shattered. And even in the midst of this nightmare, Carly felt a freedom in that, a sense of power all her own.

She bent over farther so as not to drop the rock into the canoe bottom and crack the wood. Then she tossed the mask into the canoe as well. She put her good shoulder against the side of the canoe, dug her sneakers into the wet mud, and pushed with all her might, slowly forcing the canoe out into the water.

When the canoe was floating, she climbed in. The canoe rocked hard, she was sure for one second that it was going to tip. That would be the ultimate irony, she thought. Girl escapes killer, drowns in one foot of water.

But the boat didn't flip over. She paddled way out into the center of the lake, until the dock at Camp Crystal Lake had receded to a pinpoint. Then she put the paddle on the bottom of the boat.

She picked up the mask. While he was wearing this mask, the killer had survived every attack. Without it, he was only human. The key to all the bloodshed that had happened here tonight, it was right in her hands.

Using its plastic strap, Carly placed the hockey mask over the rock. Then she hefted the heavy load of rock and mask. She struggled to get the rock above the edge of the canoe, then she tossed it into the murky waters and watched it sink. The lake gulped as it swallowed the last souvenir of the death curse of Crystal Lake.

Carly slumped in the bottom of the boat. She let the canoe drift where ever it wanted.

She had never been so tired in her life. Even opening her eyes felt like an impossible strain.

She squinted at her watch. It was after midnight. Which meant it was—

"Happy Mother's Day." Carly said aloud.

A moment later, she was asleep.

It was a deep and dreamless sleep, free of nightmares. And when she woke up an hour later, she wasn't scared.

She felt sure—deep in her bones—that the awful saga of Crystal Lake had finally come to an end.

And she was right.

For now.